Proving His Mettle

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BY

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PROVING HIS METTLE

I

HOW GEOFFREY HALFORD RENDERED HIS KING A SERVICE

Upon a grassy hillock hard by the old town of Lynn, or King's Lynn, stands to this day a small octagonal building commonly called the 'Chapel of the Red Mount,' or 'Red Chapel,' but more correctly 'Our Lady's Chapel on the Hill.' It is close to the shady avenues of horse-chestnut-trees, known as the Town or Public Walks, of which Lynn is rightly proud.

The exterior is of red brick, hence its more popular names, and within there are two floors, with a subterranean crypt. It has been altered and renovated since the period of which we write, when the present upper chapel, so beautifully groined with fan tracery, was not in existence. At that time, as much later, it was a station for pilgrims bound for the celebrated shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham, where there was an abbey church containing an exact copy of the Holy House of Nazareth. The fierce and warlike Edward I's favourite pilgrimage, when he found time to go on any with his predatory excursions against the Welsh and Scots, was to this shrine.

On a blustering night in the month of June, 1346, a lad of some seventeen years dismounted from a shaggy little pony at the base of the hillock, and fastened the bridle to a branch of a tree near. Then he proceeded to climb the path to the chapel.

He was a stalwart young stripling, with fair hair falling in curling masses upon his shoulders, and with deep-set, thoughtful blue eyes. From his plain, home-spun garments, it would seem he was not of gentle blood, but his features were finely formed, and, in nobler

raiment, he would easily have passed for the scion of some proud house. Slung upon his back were a long-bow, suited to his age, and a quiver of clothyard shafts, while in his right hand he carried a short hunting-spear —a necessary protection in those days for young and old when the wild boar roved through the woods of Merrie England.

'Beshrew, Friar Nicholas!' muttered the youth, peevishly. 'He might have chosen another night than this to burn a candle before Our Lady's shrine, or, at any rate, have found another messenger. I may miss seeing the King's train if I do not speed me. And yet, after all, I should not cry out against the good priest, for I owe him much.

'Thanks to him, I can ride and tilt, and use the sword and buckler as well as any malapert page at Castle Rising—ay, and attune the harp or lute to as melodious a lay as many a wandering minstrel,' he added, proudly, to give a violent start the moment after, and slip quickly and noiselessly behind a tree.

He had caught sight of two figures between him and the door of the sanctuary—a man's and a woman's—and the low murmur of their voices reached him. In the faint light of the struggling moon he made out that the man was sheathed in complete armour, as black as night itself, with plumes of the same sombre hue. The gold spurs that glittered on the stranger's heels bespoke him a knight at least. The woman wore the short kirtle and white hood of a waiting-woman of the peasant class. A strange pair for such a tryst, and so thought the lad.

They turned, even as he shrank behind the tree, and walked slowly towards him, to pause within a dozen paces of him. It was too dark for him to discern the features of either, for the woman's wimple half hid her face, while the shadow of the knight's upraised visor hung over his; but their voices now reached the lad plainly.

'I shall not fail, Alicia,' said the knight. 'The ambush is well set. Ere to-morrow's sun rises the star of England will have set—for ever, let us hope. Edward III and his son, that malapert prince, will lie gory corpses upon Rising Heath; and Philip of Valois

will not only be firmly seated upon the throne of France, but be afforded the opportunity for which he waits of invading these shores.'

'And thou and I will then reap the reward of our plotting, Sir John,' whispered his female companion in soft, cultured, refined tones, that belied her mean attire, and betokened it clearly a disguise. 'But time flieth. Haste away, or thou mayst arrive at the ambush too late to take a hand in the brave work, if not to find thy men o'erthrown, without any strong hand and brain to lead them. The royal lion and his whelp will not go under without a fierce struggle.'

'Thou art right. Farewell, Alicia, until I return to tell thee that Edward of England and his son are no more, and to claim the fulfilment of thy promise!'

'Thou wilt not forget that, whate'er betide, HE must not be injured? Remember that, for the sake of the plot succeeding later — in case thou dost fail in this attack — he must feign resistance against thee, and, mayhap, be put to the necessity of striking down some of thy men. Thou must warn thy followers o't, so that none may in their rage mistake him for a foe, and slay, or grievously hurt him.'

The knight ground out a fierce imprecation.

'You seem more concerned about his safety, Alicia, than mine, for all your repeated asseverations to the contrary,' he snarled. 'Malediction! if I really thought he were more to you than I——'

She stopped him by flinging her arms around his neck, and kissing him.

'You silly, jealous Sir John!' she exclaimed with a low laugh. 'How often am I to tell you that the foreign lordling is nothing to me, save as a stepping-stone to our joint triumph—yours and mine? There! No more now. Go! Haste thee to the scene of ambush. I shall be a prey to the keenest anxiety until I hear from thee all is well, and the royal Edward and the hope of his house lie corpses on Rising Heath.'

The pair embraced again, and then the knight turned and strode quickly past the tree behind which the boy was crouching, down the hill-side, while the woman darted away in the opposite direction.

'Shield us from all harm, but here is a vile plot indeed!' gasped the lad, stepping from his concealment, his face gleaming white with horror and consternation. Geoffrey Halford, thou must away at once and warn the King of this dreadful peril. The vile wretches, the abominable traitors! They purpose the ambushing of the Royal train on Rising Heath, and the deliberate murder of his sacred Majesty and the Prince of Wales, the gallant young Black Prince. I must foil this dastardly plot. I must with all speed intercept the Royal party.'

He raced off down the hill, not following the path taken by the traitor knight, but a shorter cut to where he had left his pony. To his relief, he found the animal there, nibbling the grass around. In an instant he was in the saddle, and urging his willing and sturdy little mount away back towards Lynn, the errand of the good Friar Nicholas completely forgotten.

But only a short distance did Geoffrey Halford pursue the road to Lynn; then, wheeling his pony, he struck off sharply from it southwards. By brake and fen he galloped through the night, splashing through rivulets, and stretching across wide, ghostly heathlands, guided by the intermittent moonlight. Mile after mile he covered, touching up his game little nag whenever it showed signs of flagging.

'I am well past the scoundrels now,' he said at length, 'and may safely take to the road. Heaven, and the train hath not passed. No, here it comes! I was only just in time.'

A brilliant and fairly strong array of horse and foot was debouching from a thick wood a little way ahead of him. Innumerable pennons flaunted above in the breeze. Geoffrey Halford once more drove his unspurred heels into his pony's flanks, and cantered forward to meet it.

'Ho, there!' he called out. 'I want speech with one in authority. I have tidings of a plot to waylay and ambush ye!'

The vanguard at once drew rein with startled exclamations, whereupon a knight, clad in rich, inlaid armour, rode up on a light hack, and demanded sternly:

'What means this stoppage?'

'Yon rider who cometh, my lord, hath called out an ambush is ahead.'

'What, in Old England! But, gramercy, I forgot! Our fens and woods are full of naughty, roving varlets. Stand fast! Close in! 'Ware outlaw rangers! I will speak with this stranger.'

'Why, 'tis a lad!' he cried in surprise. 'How darest thou halt the King's train in this way, malapert?'

'I have heard a plot to ambush ye,' answered Geoffrey, pulling back his pony upon its haunches. ''Twas at the Chapel on the Mount I heard it. Ye are to be attacked upon Rising Heath, and the King and the Prince of Wales murdered.'

'Is this truth, boy?' demanded the knight, bending a penetrating look upon the youngster.

'It is—it is, indeed, truth,' panted Geoffrey. 'I swear it. I heard the plotters conversing. Oh, do not advance without heed, as ye value your King and your prince's lives.'

'Dismount, and come with me before his Majesty,' said the knight.

Geoffrey's heart gave a great bound with joy. He was to look upon, to speak with his King—the first knight in Christendom, the flower of English chivalry! And no doubt he would also be afforded a glimpse of that youthful prince, the hope and glory of his country!

Past this throng of staring men-at-arms, archers, and billmen, knights, squires, and pages, they went to a magnificent litter of cloth of gold, embroidered all over with the royal arms of Engand and France combined. This litter was borne by a pair of mules, between shafts before and behind; and the trappings of the mules were as gorgeous as the appointments of the litter itself, hanging down to the very ground, and shimmering with rare jewels and gold and silver filigree-work and ornaments in the faint light.

But Geoffrey Halford had no eyes for all this pomp and splendour. He was at once attracted by the truly regal and warlike figure to be seen reclining in half-armour upon the soft cushions within the litter, the curtains of which had been drawn back. Beside the head of the litter, sitting a coal-black and spirited-looking

palfrey, was a boyish form, also in half-armour—a youth not quite Geoffrey's age or height.

'How now, my lord Earl, why this halt?' asked the King. 'And whom have you there?'

'A youth, my liege, who bringeth tidings of a plot to ambush us,' replied the noble, bending his knee before the litter.

'Ha! sayest thou so?' cried the monarch, making as if he would spring from the litter, while his visage darkened and his eyes flashed fiercely. 'Come hither, boy! What is this? Who are the traitors who would attack us?'

Geoffrey had already doffed his hat. He now dropped upon one knee, and stammered:

'I know not the full names of the traitors, your Majesty, but the knight was called Sir John, and the lady Alicia. They spoke by the Red Chapel, at Lynn, and I overheard them. There is an ambush set for your train on Rising Heath, and the conspirators seek your death, and that of your noble son, the Prince of Wales.'

Edward of England bounded like an enraged lion from his litter.

'My helmet, shield, lance, and war-horse at once!' he roared. 'Hither — hither, squires, and gird your King! Danger threatens us. My lords and gentlemen all, arm yourselves; don your martial harness! There are vile rebels and traitors besetting the road ahead. And thou, too, my gallant son, hadst better assume thy helm and shield. Thou wilt ride side by side with me in the onslaught upon these recreant knaves?'

'Right gladly, father!'

And the mounted youth sprang from his palfrey, while a dozen mounted squires dashed up, leading a couple of splendid destriers, laden with their royal masters' plumed headpieces and hoods of mail, and the long, cross-handled swords, or bearing the lance and shield.

On a march the knights seldom wore the heavier part of their armour or bestrode their chargers, which were left to the care of their squires and pages. Consequently, if suddenly assailed, they might easily be overpowered.

Geoffrey Halford gazed curiously and attentively at the young Prince of Wales, for such he knew the youth before him must be. The gallant young scion of English royalty, soon to win undying fame as the Black Prince — so named from the dusky hue he affected in everything—was pale with excitement, though a hectic spot glowed in either cheek. His hair was of raven blackness, and fell in clustering curls to his shoulders; his eyes were of the same colour — large, lustrous, steady, and penetrating; his skin as soft as a woman's, and his features as gentle, too, save for the long straight nose and the tightly-shut, thinnish lips and resolute chin.

The ready squires and pages lost no time in buckling and riveting him and his royal father into their harness; while the other lords and knights followed their example, and also equipped themselves *cap-à-pié*.

Geoffrey Halford stood looking on in slightly bewildered but rapt attention, no longer unpleasantly self-conscious of his own humble standing. He was recalled to himself by the Prince of Wales turning to him, and saying:

'And who art thou, boy? There is no doubt of the truth of your assertion, I suppose?'

'Oh, do not doubt it, your Grace. I overheard the plotters discussing their purpose, as I did tell thy royal father.'

'Who art thou? I like the look of thee. Thy name?'

'My name is Geoffrey Halford, may it please your Grace.'

'And whence comest thou?'

'From Lynn, noble prince. My father is the keeper of the hostelry of the White Hart there.'

The Black Prince started, drew himself haughtily up, then frowned, and said:

'I had thought thee gentle from thy looks and speech, but, lowly born or not, 'tis meet thou shouldst receive some guerdon for this night's incalculable service. Most noble father, I would crave a boon of you.'

''Tis granted, my dear son, ere 'tis asked,' replied the King, coming forward now, with his visor up. 'It concerneth this youth, I presume? Well, what of him? He deserveth much at our hands for this timely

warning, which, mayhap, hath saved England, her King, and her heir.'

'I would ask thee, father, to permit me to include this youth in my train. Make him one of my pages of honour, and give him the chance of winning the gold spurs of a knight, as I hope to one day myself.'

King Edward knit his brows.

'The boy is not noble. I did hear him announce himself as the son of a common innkeeper. Thou must not let thy gratitude outrun thy discretion, Edward, lad. There is many a high-born youth would be glad to serve in the train of his prince.'

'Thou hast already granted my request, father,' responded the young prince, compressing his lips tightly, and flashing a fierce glance around at the listening nobility, squires, and pages. 'And I see no reason why a commoner should not rise to knighthood if he performeth valorous deeds, as one may rise to the noblest dignity by wit and scholarly attainments in the Church. If this lad be of humble birth, he hath rendered England and England's crown to-night a service that deserveth a high reward. And I can soon remedy the disadvantage under which he laboureth.'

Stepping forward, the gallant young scion of royalty gently tapped the amazed and overjoyed Geoffrey upon the cheek, crying out in a loud voice as he did so:

'From this hour let no one reproach thee with thy humble origin. I, Edward of Wales, make thee a gentleman, and number thee amongst the pages of my body.'

II

HOW THE KING'S TRAIN OVERTHREW THE AMBUSH

King Edward laughed. He looked now, of a verity, the warlike monarch; he was completely cased in steel. Every cunningly-fashioned joint and plate showed to advantage his elegant but robust shape. He stood fully six feet high, and his limbs were handsomely proportioned. Under the uplifted visor of his bascinet frowned his sharp and aquiline visage, lighted by a pair of quick and piercing eyes; now, however, twinkling with merriment.

'My dear boy, thou hast quite overlooked one important matter.'

'What is that, father?' asked the Black Prince, a little disconcertedly.

'Thou dost not know whether this new-fledged young gentleman of thine is agreeable to becoming thy page?'

There was a light, amused laugh amongst the knights standing around, and the boy prince flushed and flashed a nettled glance about the circle. Then he looked somewhat crestfallen and anxiously at Geoffrey Halford. That youth, thrilled through with rapture at the high honour conferred upon him, came proudly to his relief.

'O sire, O most noble and generous prince, I shall be only too pleased to accept the proud position offered me—to serve your Grace as a page.'

The boy prince's face cleared again and glowed with gratified vanity.

'There, my royal father,' he cried triumphantly, 'thou art answered! 'Twould have been passing strange indeed had Edward of Wales's condescension

and generosity been thrown away, as thou didst seem to hint. Come, then, Geoffrey Halford, follow in my train, and it will be only thine own fault if thou dost not win thy spurs before thou art much older.'

'Stay! Not so fast,' exclaimed the King. 'The boy must first obtain his father's consent to the compact, before we can consider it ratified. Master Halford, when thou canst come to us and say thy parent is also agreeable to this change in thy fortunes, then thou may'st become my son's page, but not till then. And now, boy, to the matter more pressingly in hand. What of this ambuscade thou hast reported? 'Tis on Rising Heath, thou sayest?'

'Yes, my liege.'

'Dost thou know the exact spot? And how many the traitors number?'

'I do not, your Majesty. I but heard two of the plotters in converse, a knight and a lady by the Red Chapel, whither I was bound on an errand for the good Friar Nicholas of Lynn.'

'Sir John you said the knight was called?'

'I did, sire.'

'Humph! I know many Sir Johns, but none so vile I trow as to seek the death of his lawful liege and suzerain. There, for instance, stands one Sir John — Sir John Chandos. 'Twas not he, I ween, thou didst hear conspiring against the life of his sovereign at this Red Chapel thou speakest of?'

He laughed, as he pointed to a tall, erect knight of middle age, with a grave, weather-beaten, battle-scarred face, full of martial fire and honesty of purpose, however; and all around laughed too, the knight himself joining in. Geoffrey looked at the veteran warrior, who was to achieve such greatness in the latter part of his life as has emblazoned his name in letters of gold on the scroll of chivalry; whose fame was to rival almost that of the Black Prince.

'No,' answered the youth solemnly, with a shake of the head. 'The traitor was not as tall, and much stouter. He was younger too, I should judge, and his face, as I saw it for a moment when he passed by my hiding-place, was darker, heavier, sourer-looking.'

King Edward led off another burst of laughter from the assembled nobles and knights at the serious tone and gravity of the lad; then the monarch composed his countenance and frowned darkly.

'Come, my lords and gentlemen,' he cried, 'we will try conclusions without more ado with these recreant villains. I wot the very spot, methinks, they will have chosen for their ambush; a goodly one i'faith for such a purpose. They must be pretty strong in numbers to risk an encounter with our train though, so we must use caution in approaching their lair. Still, forewarned is forearmed; and it should go hard with us an we do not turn the tables and snare the rats in their own trap. We will advance in our present order, but hold ye all well in hand, gentlemen, ready to charge en masse upon the hornets' nest, when I give the word. Sir John Chandos, you will keep ten lances in reserve, in case I mistake the place of ambush.'

The term 'lance' included three followers or attendants at least, either on foot or on horseback, as well as the men-at-arms. Chandos had, therefore, something like forty or fifty soldiers at his command. The old knight chose his detachment and fell to the rear with it, as the train once more advanced, at a brisk trot, the archers and billmen running to keep up with the mounted men, in order to make up for the lost time.

Half an hour of diversified country brought the party to the edge of Rising Heath. It stretched away to the castle and village in a wide, unbroken tract, redeemed from barrenness only by the beautifully varied hues of the broom and bracken. Here and there its level surface was dotted by thick coppices and groves, which loomed up like mighty sentinels against the night sky.

'Keep thou close by me, Geoffrey Halford, and acquit thyself as becometh thy new station in life,' had said the Black Prince, as they all mounted.

And Geoffrey had obediently fallen into the line of thickly caparisoned squires and archers attendant on his new master, unheeding their haughty and invidious, though slightly veiled glances, consumed with delight as he was at the good fortune that had overtaken him.

The road was hardly to be distinguished in the

darkness from the surrounding wild, and, as the *cortège* entered upon this, the knights and men-at-arms settled themselves more firmly in their saddles and took good grips of their lances, while the archers, without slackening speed, drew their longbows from the leathern cases, in which they carried them to protect the strings from the night dew, and plucked forth arrows from their quivers, ready to fit and shoot.

'My Lord D'Arcourt,' said King Edward to a foreign-looking knight beside him, whose armour and weapons glittered with gold and precious stones, 'thou seest yon great clump of trees, a good bowshot length from here? 'Tis 'neath their branches of a surety these recreant knaves are lying in wait for us.

'Ye note the clump, my lords and gentlemen? When we are arrived within forty paces of it, let every archer ply his bow and send a clothyard shaft whistling amidst its undergrowth. Then hard on the volley, my trusty knights, will I, your King, lead ye in a charge I hope we will repeat time without number within the next year or two on the soil of France.

'My Lord Chandos, thou wilt wait to make sure I have rightly judged the rebels' whereabouts, and then sweep round and take them in the rear. Let not one person of seeming importance escape, gentlemen, an' ye can prevent it. We would fain learn who our secret foes are, and not leave one behind to plot further treason in our absence, fighting for our just rights, and England's glory.'

Silent as the grave, save for the mad tossing of the branches in the boisterous gusts, lay the copse in question as the royal procession fearlessly wound along towards it. Geoffrey Halford, as well as many a more experienced head, thought the King must have made a mistake as to the site of the ambush. When the prescribed distance was almost reached, King Edward raised himself to his full, grand height in his stirrups and roared in lion-like tones:

'Shoot, archers, shoot—altogether! Forward, my lords and knights! Follow your King! To it—to it! Charge! St. George for Merrie England! Strike home! Strike home!'

He plunged his spurs into his gallant war-horse's flanks, and the noble beast shot forward like an arrow, while after it thundered the mail-clad cavalry behind to the ringing shout:

'For King Edward and St. George! Death to the foul traitors! Down with the recreants!'

And before them whirled the grey-goose shafts of the famous English bowmen like a drift of snow on the wings of the wind to plunge hissing amongst the thick, interlaced leaves and bushes of the thicket and elicit a perfect babel of startled and dismayed yells, agonized screams, oaths, and implications.

'By'r Lakin, my royal father was right in his surmise,' shouted the Black Prince, as he swept into the very van of the mailed onslaught with couched lance. 'Forward, forward, hearts of chivalry! Death to every traitor knave!'

Geoffrey Halford took part in the mad charge, but being only poorly mounted, he was quickly out-distanced by his better equipped fellow-pages, who all rushed after their masters. The lad kept ahead, however, of the billmen and archers, who poured in a wildly huzzaing, disorderly mob after the knights and men-at-arms to share in the furious *mêlèe*. Panic-stricken howls rang from the grove.

'Save yourselves! Save yourselves! We are betrayed.'

A stentorian voice bellowed:

'Stand fast, ye poltroons! Stand fast! Remember we outnumber them three to one. Shoot! Shoot, archers! Ply your shafts, ye cravens! Mow down horse and man! Sweep them away with your good arrows! Break their onset and victory is ours. St. Denis for France! Death to Edward of Windsor, and all who follow him! To me, to me, valiant sirs! Rally round me, my sworn brothers and comrades, and remember the broad lands in sunny France that will be yours if you rid Philip of France of the royal rival and contestant for his crown this night.'

A straggling, ill-timed flight of mingled arrows and cross-bow bolts hurtled out of the thicket into the faces of the English knights, as these swept up the next

instant in full career. But not a man or a horse went down. The few shafts that did fly straight were caught upon the broad shields thrown forward to cover their owners' heads and breasts. Then in amongst the trees burst the mail-clad horsemen, spitting the ambushed foe upon their long lances and trampling others down again into the dense undergrowth out of which the rascals had come.

Awful was the turmoil that ensued. The knights threw away their entangled or unwieldy lances—no longer of any use at such close quarters—and took to their swords, battle-axes, or maces, warding off with or catching on their shields the dreadful bills and pikes of their unmounted foes. These were quickly overcome and scattered in headlong flight, already broken and demoralized as they were.

'Ah! See! Yonder are the leaders of this rebel horde, gentlemen!' presently cried the King, pointing with his sword to where some dozen knights, without a device of any kind upon their armour and with their visors closed, were trying to creep off unobserved among the trees. 'After the skulking miscreants! Don't let one of them escape!'

On this the band of knights in question fled immediately without further concealment, throwing away their shields and heavier arms to enable them to run the better. After them in hot pursuit dashed King Edward and his guard of honour, the Black Prince quickly leading the chase. But the dense growth impeded the horsemen, and the fugitives gained the edge of the coppice and threw themselves upon the backs of as many waiting coursers, just as there came the thudding of hoofs to the rear of the ambush, the clatter of iron accoutrements and the war-cry—'A Chandos! A Chandos!'

'After them! After them, Chandos! For our royal sake do not let them get away. Capture some of the knaves at least, that we may force them into discovering the promoters of this vile plot, trace it home to its true originator.'

Sir John Chandos wheeled with his division and spurred furiously after the fleeing horsemen. But the

shades of night had already swallowed them up, and the pursuit could only be conducted by following up the sound of the thudding of their horses' hoofs on the turf.

A few of the rebel billmen and men-at-arms were still resisting against the royal soldiers. The rest had either fallen or fled pursued by the remaining knights and squires.

'Quarter! Quarter!' the despairing wretches now shouted.

And the Black Prince, spurring up to the combatants, sternly cried:

'Down with your arms, traitors, and acknowledge your rightful sovereign, and quarter will be granted you.'

Thereupon all threw down their weapons and quietly submitted to being secured and pinioned by their captors. King Edward's eyes fell upon Geoffrey Halford, sitting his pony near by.

'Well hast thou saved England's King this night, good my lad,' cried the monarch. 'My son has conferred none too high a guerdon upon thee. Thou shalt accompany him as his page to France, and there carve thy way to name and fortune.'

Geoffrey stammered out some suitable expression of gratitude for this royal condescension; and the King passed on and rejoined the Black Prince beside the sullen array of prisoners.

'Away with them!' he cried with a wave of the hand. 'Remove them from my sight, or I may be tempted to have them hanged to a man upon these good trees around. 'Twill be better for them and my own peace that I leave the questioning of them until we reach the castle.'

The men-at-arms, who had dashed off in pursuit of the fugitives, now came riding back in twos and threes; and at length Sir John Chandos and his command returned, with not a prisoner to show for their trouble.

'We could not overtake the miscreants in the darkness, my liege,' the old knight reported. 'They one and all gave us the slip, and we have only had our chase to no purpose.'

'Ah, well,' replied King Edward, 'we have captured a goodly number of the common soldiers, and should

be able to learn the names of their leaders from them. Let the wounded be looked to—the more dangerously hurt given hurdles! We will resume our interrupted journey. It is late, and I would not that my lady mother hath retired when we reach the castle.'

'Master Halford,' said the Black Prince, riding up to where Geoffrey was, as the royal train once more fell into marching order, 'we will detain thee no further. Thou may'st return now to thy home in Lynn, happy in the knowledge thou hast rendered England and England's sovereign a service that has made Edward Prince of Wales thy friend and patron for life. I shall expect to see thee before to-morrow noon at Castle Rising, and hear thou hast thy lawful guardian's permission to become my page. I have taken a great fancy to thee, Geoffrey Halford, and shall be wofully disappointed an I have to go to France without thee. I hope I shall have the pleasure of seeing thee one day in knightly spurs by my side.'

III

THE NEW PAGE PROVES HIS METTLE

The hostelry of the White Hart was the oldest and most pretentious of such places in Lynn. It stood in the market place opposite the old parish church of St. Margaret, and was a low, straggling building, with an overhanging first floor, and pretty little lattice casements. The porch was overgrown with honeysuckle and clematis, and benches were placed outside. Over the horse-trough swung the sign, bearing on it an indifferently painted representation of a white stag with the sur-royal of crown antler, ' at gaze,' or full-faced.

On this lovely sunny June morning, Geoffrey Halford, the innkeeper's comely lad, was fidgeting impatiently in the saddle of his little bay pony, surrounded by an awed and admiring knot of hinds in plain tabards, or waistless smocks, of their class. Geoffrey was decked out in his bravest finery, and was proudly and happily conscious of the curious and envious glances the 'prentices in the booths around, plying their masters' craft, were bestowing upon him. And he blushed with pleasure, vain youth, whenever a basket-carrying maid, tripping across the cobble stones on her morning's marketing, turned a second time to look at him. He would bend forward at such times, in feigned ignorance of the compliment, to flick a non-existent speck of dust from his mount's martingale, or make sure the hook of his curb-chain had not been shaken loose.

The news had spread like wildfire all around that Master Roger Halford's lad had saved King Edward's train from falling into an ambush laid for it by traitors, on the previous night, while on its way to Castle Rising, and that he had been paid the high honour by the young Black Prince, the royal heir apparent, in return for the service, of being made a gentleman and a royal page.

'How much longer doth my father mean to detain me?' grumbled Geoffrey presently. 'Tom Ostler, see if he hath yet finished inditing his message.'

The ostler was turning towards the inn, when old Roger Halford appeared, framed in the porch, holding a scroll tied up with ribbon and sealed with a great splotchy seal.

The innkeeper was a middle-sized, middle-aged man, with the bluff, rubicund face associated with his profession. But there was now a grave and rather perturbed expression upon it, foreign to its usually cheery, jovial aspect, as he advanced towards his son.

He displayed in his walk something of a military bearing, which had made it the general opinion among his neighbours that he had been a soldier in his youth. Of these bygone days, though, he could never be prevailed to speak, even by his son, who shared the wonder of his neighbours and customers at his reticence on a subject most men were only too eager to dwell and expatiate upon.

'Gossips,' said Roger as he came up, 'I would have a parting word aside with my lad. Do ye go inside and tell good Dame Joan to fill ye out full horns of ale to quaff good luck and godspeed to my son's new departure in life. I will be with ye anon to join ye in a cup.'

The wagoners and ploughboys were not slow to accept the invitation, and, raising a clownish cheer for Geoffrey, entered the hostel in high glee.

'Geoffrey, lad,' said Roger, laying a hand upon the pony's bridle, and not looking at the youth, 'thou wilt deliver this letter into no hands but those it is intended for. Thou wilt make no mistake, lad? Do not trust it out of your hands to any go-between, but give it thine own self to the Lady Alicia Crosbie, lady-in-waiting to the Dowager Queen at Castle Rising.'

The youth gave a violent start in his saddle.

'How called you the lady, father?' he queried in a strange, horrified voice, 'the Lady Alicia?'

'Even so. What of the name?'

And Roger Halford looked sharply and anxiously at his son.

'Oh! O—h! father, I forgot to tell thee last night

that the traitor knight, Sir John, called his female companion Alicia, and she was clearly of superior station in life. Dost think is it possible this lady at the castle you wish me to deliver this letter to could have been she?'

All the rubicund hue died out of Roger Halford's broad face and a startled, dismayed look overspread it. He bent his head quickly to hide that tell-tale expression from his son's searching gaze and pretended to be busily examining the lad's stirrup-iron. But the hand that held the scroll was visibly trembling, and it was a moment or two before he answered.

'Gramercy, boy! What put such an ill-omened supposition as that into thy noddle? Go to, go to! Thou wert ever ready to jump at hasty conclusions. Have a care, Geoffrey, how thou thinkest evil of those in high places without good grounds. Alicia is a common enough name, even as mine or thine own is; and it is not at all likely—in troth it is extremely unlikely—that the Lady Alicia Crosbie would indulge in such dangerous pastime as to plot treason against her mistress's royal son.'

''Twas the similarity of the name, father, that struck me. But then, as thou saith, 'tis a common enough name. Every serving-wench that is not a Joan or a Mattie beareth it. How comes it though, dad, thou knowest this lady so intimately as to write her like this? I never heard thee mention her before.'

Roger Halford still kept his eyes averted.

'Thou hast not heard me mention many things of my past life, boy. I was formerly a hobler in her father's, the old Lord Crosbie's, service. She hath but lately come to Rising to take the place of one of Queen Isabella's French damsels, who hath tired of her close confinement, and pined after the freedom of a Court, I suppose, and gone back to her native country.

'I have presumed on my former services and acquaintance with the Lady Alicia, Geoffrey, to address her on thy behalf, commending thee to her kind patronage—entreating her to admit thee to her favourable countenance, so that your interests at Court may be forwarded. Thy good fortune, the favour of the noble young prince,

to say nothing of thy lowly birth, lad, are sure to make thee numerous enemies—enemies who will seek thy ruin and fall from thy royal patron's good graces in every conceivable way; and 'twill be well if thou hast a powerful friend and ally at Court.'

'I can well understand that the gallant young prince's special favour, father, will cause envious and bitter feelings against me among my fellow-pages.'

'And not among them alone, my son. Ah! thou hast no idea of the intrigues, the constant schemings, the heart-burnings, and jealousies of a Court. High-born lords and ladies, the noblest in the land, seek each other's downfall; strive to replace one another in the sovereign's regard and in positions of power. Take then this letter and give it into the hands of none but the Lady Alicia Crosbie. Do not say aught to her, save that the message will explain all. Go now, in God's name, my brave lad, and forget not thine old and humbly-born father amongst thy new purse-proud and birth-prouder companions. Grace 'tend thee, and see thou art not ignominiously deprived of thy new rank ere the day be out and sent packing from the noble prince's service.'

'Not much fear of that, father,' laughed Geoffrey, as he carefully consigned the scroll to the gipsire, or pouch, at his belt, which, with the dagger that was thrust through it to fasten it, he was now privileged to wear as a gentleman.

'I don't know so much about it, Geoff, my lad. "Put not thy trust in princes," be a very old saying. They and their royal fathers have a nasty habit—nay, none worse, God wot—of changing their minds.'

'Ah, well, dad, the gallant young Prince of Wales is not like that, I'm sure. Good-bye!'

He shook his father's great brown, horny hand, then struck spurs to his impatient, spirited little nag, and clattered across the square. As he went, his father's guests, crowding to the porch, raised a cheer to speed him. He looked back and waved his cap gaily; then kissed his hand to old Dame Joan, his father's housekeeper, the only mother he had ever known, who showed herself at an open lattice to see the last of her brave lad.

Some of the apprentices in the booths sent up an ironical shout; but Geoffrey could afford to smile at such evidence of their envy. The lads' masters, and masters' wives and daughters, however, looked, and even leaned, out of the upper windows to call their good wishes, with more or less sincerity, as it happened whether the good folk had a son of their own or a daughter who had been casting sheep's eyes at the youth.

In returning these salutations, Geoffrey bowed and doffed his plumed cap with all the grace of one born to the proud position he now held; then, giving his nag its head, he left the town quickly behind, and rode blithely along the road towards Castle Rising. He whistled and carolled as merrily as the birds in the woodland coppices around him at first in the exuberance of his spirits, his high, ardent, and romantic hopes and imaginings of the bright future before him as a page of the Black Prince.

But at length a meditative mood came over him. He was going to enter that grim and ghostly keep, Castle Rising, which had inspired him with so much awe as a child; to penetrate the awful, unhallowed secrets of its tradition-haunted walls and dungeon chambers; to perhaps behold the 'Dark Lady'—that weird, terrible being of mystery in his younger days, who was never on any account permitted to pass beyond the portals of the stronghold.

He recalled, even now with a slight shiver of superstitious dread and a nervous glance around, how a description of her by a wagoner, gossiping in the kitchen of the hostel after taking some market produce to the castle, had haunted his childish dreams by night, and his waking thoughts by day for long enough—a tall, spare figure, robed from head to heel in black, with a face the hue of death, and so worn as almost to resemble a skeleton's grisly countenance. And yet, not a face to inspire pity or commiseration, as one lean and lank from suffering might, but a face most repulsive and terrifying from its diabolically cruel, maniacal, malignant, crafty expression.

The wagoner, whose idle talk had given rise to this gruesome and hideous nightmare in the boy's

undeveloped mind, had only seen her looking out of one of the upper windows of the keep. But others there were who had seen her walking, attended by her tire-women, in the shrubberies of the enclosure. When Geoffrey grew older, though, he was not satisfied with the silly and contradictory tales current amongst his playmates as to who the mysterious 'Dark Lady' of Rising was, and began to ask questions. His father, Dame Joan, and the others put him off at first. But at length he learned the truth from the ostler.

It was even more ghastly, horrible, and blood-curdling than he had imagined. His wildly extravagant, superstitious terrors of the unsexed prisoner of the castle now gave place to utter detestation and loathing; and the pity he had sometimes in his generosity been inclined to feel for her, shut up thus for life within those iron walls, vanished, never to return. A life of the most frightful penance, the continual wearing of the ascetic's haircloth garment and iron girdle, whose sharp points tortured the flesh, could not sufficiently atone, in his estimation, for the fearful crime she had been guilty of. And if Tom Ostler and rumour spoke truth, this woman, who had been such in name only, was languishing out her remaining years in bitter repining, rather than in true repentance for her dreadful past.

Geoffrey Halford was aroused from his reverie by the musical winding of a horn in the distance. He knew the air tootled as one of the various signals of the chase, denoting that a wild boar had been started, and was being closely pressed by some of the huntsmen, who were calling the others.

'It must be a party from Rising,' exclaimed the new-made page. 'I must see the sport, and be in at the death, if possible. The gallant young prince is sure to be foremost in it.'

Striking spurs once more to his mount, he galloped in the direction of the sounds, which were ringing ever nearer, mingled now with the furious baying of the hounds in full cry. He had traversed about half the distance to Rising, and before him rose up a thick belt of woodland, chequered throughout with fenny bogs.

Geoffrey knew every path that traversed this region.

Oft he had wandered about it with his boy-companions nesting and snaring the hares and rabbits. He knew almost every leafy glade and miry pit.

Louder and louder swelled the well-known notes of the horn and the bay of the dogs; and just as he gained the edge of the timber the signal rang forth that the quarry had turned at bay. Plunging in amongst the trees, his stout little nag, which seemed to have caught the infection of its master's excitement and eagerness to get up in time, breasted and burst through the interlacing undergrowth, in the direction of the blood-firing sounds. It dashed out into a small dark glade upon a scene which made its young rider's blood, though at fever heat, run suddenly cold, while filling his heart with awful dismay.

An enormous wild boar, with flaming eyes and jaws distended, was standing incensant, as it would be called in a heraldic device, growling horribly and foaming with rage, upon a beautiful white palfrey, which lay kicking feebly in the death-throes, its chest completely torn open by the savage monster's terrible tusks. Close by, as if hurled from the saddle and partially stunned by the shock of the encounter, lay the figure of a lovely and richly attired girl of about fifteen—no more—while around were two dogs gored to death, and others keeping a respectful, frightened distance.

The scene was not yet complete. Some little distance off there sprawled upon his face a young fellow—apparently nineteen or twenty years of age—clad in the most sumptuous courtly raiment of the period; silk, satin, and velvet of rainbow hues. Beside him was a boar-spear broken in twain. His horse was nowhere to be seen. It had evidently dashed off, affrighted, into the thicket.

The other huntsmen and huntswomen were not in sight, but they could be heard rushing to the spot.

Quick as thought, for all his horror and consternation, Geoffrey whipped his trusty long-bow from his back, fitted an arrow to the cord, and took hasty aim at the savage monster of the wild. Even as he did so, the girl scrambled to her feet, mute with terror, and turned to fly; and the boar, catching sight of her, bounded over the dying palfrey, and rushed full tilt at her. She flung

aloft her arms, her limbs collapsed under her, and, with a piercing shriek of despair, she sank right in its path.

The next instant would inevitably have been her last, but simultaneously Geoffrey's bow-string twanged. The arrow flew, and, shot with unerring aim, buried itself almost to the feathered butt in the infuriated brute's shoulder. Stumbling heavily, with a loud grunt, the stricken beast fell upon its head within two strides of the helpless, swooning girl.

Geoffrey sprang from his saddle, rushed across to where the broken boar-spear lay, and caught up the head part, then wheeled to give the *coup-de-grâce* to the mortally wounded animal. But as he approached it, the boar reared up its terrifying front once more, and, grinding its tusks and foaming in the excess of its fury, attempted to seize him.

Evading the fierce snap of its jaws, the dauntless youth sprang in and buried the spear-head in its heart, when it rolled over dead, almost without another struggle. At the same moment a disorderly throng of brilliantly-dressed horsemen, ladies, and attendants swept up; and the beaten dogs rushed back to worry their slain foe. Geoffrey recognized the Black Prince at once amongst the foremost of the splendid train.

'Look to the Lady Sybil!' shouted the prince. 'Where are her maidens? Let them tend her. Some of you raise up Master Rupert de Mowbray, and see what hurt he hath come by. Master Halford, I saw thy gallant rescue—thy death-stroke, at least—as I came up. How camest thou here in such timely opportunity, and what befell?'

'I cannot tell what happened first, your Grace,' replied Geoffrey, 'for I did but come on the spot in time to see the boar rushing upon the lady, whose palfrey had been gored. Yonder young gentleman, who seemeth so sore hurted, was lying senseless upon the sward, with his spear broken beside him.'

'And thou didst spring at once, without hesitance, to the Lady Sybil's succour? It were a deed of true knightly worth: what dost say, Sir John Chandos?' cried the boy prince, with face and eyes aglow with delight and admiration.

'Twas indeed a knightly act, your Grace,' replied the old knight; 'one deserving of the highest praise. The lady hath but fainted—she is, quite unhurt, only frightened. Thou may'st make thy mind easy on her score, my prince. And as for young Rupert de Mowbray, he hath cracked his crown by a fall, but will be all right anon. Doubtless his horse shied from the boar's charge and flung him against a tree, or his spear missed its mark, struck the earth, and, breaking, threw him. Sir Henry Penthony owes his daughter's life to this gallant young gentleman's dashing courage and promptness. I congratulate your Grace on your choice of him for your page!'

IV

THE LADY SYBIL

GEOFFREY HALFORD blushed deeply with pleasure at such praise from the old noble and his liege-lord's commendation.

'So please your Grace, I did but do what any of your subjects would ha' done in the like circumstances. It wanted no great courage to spear the boar after wounding it to the death with my arrow.'

'Well said. I am pleased to know my page hath the modesty, as well as the bravery, that doth become a true aspirant to knightly honour,' replied the Black Prince with an approving nod; 'but for all thine own under-rating of thy gallant act, Geoffrey Halford, the Lady Sybil Penthony and young Rupert De Mowbray may consider they owe their lives to thee. The boar would of a surety have gored the lady had it not been for thee ere we could have come up. Come, mount that palfrey again and ride beside me! My ladies and gentlemen, we will return to the castle. We have had enough sport for one morning, I trow. A murrain on this steed of mine! Had it not put its foot in that hole, and come so near throwing me, I might ha' had the glory of slaying the boar and rescuing the Lady Sybil instead of thee, Master Geoffrey.'

And the boy prince bestowed almost an envious glance upon his page.

The senseless young gallant, Rupert de Mowbray, now showed signs of returning consciousness; and the Lady Sybil Penthony had already recovered from her faint under the ministrations of her waiting-woman and the other ladies. A merciful hand put her dying palfrey out of its agony.

'Let the attendants form a litter for Lady Sybil,' ordered the Prince of Wales. 'How is she now?'

'She hath revived, your Grace, and is none the worse. She expresses her intention of mounting before one of her women, and saith there is no need of a litter,' reported one of the train. 'She desires to thank her brave deliverer—to see and speak with him.'

'Go, Master Geoffrey,' smiled the young prince, 'and receive the fitting and sweetest reward of valour—the gracious smile from lady's eyes.'

Colouring high, Geoffrey followed the bearer of the message to one side of the glade, where the fair young girl he had rescued was standing in the midst of the other ladies of the party. Shyly he advanced, but she no sooner caught sight of him that she rushed forward impulsively and held out her hand.

'My gallant preserver!' she cried. 'But for your courage and quickness of action, I should be a hideously mangled corpse at this moment.'

Geoffrey was more confused than ever. He believed he had never looked upon so beautiful a face, and it was made doubly attractive now as it was turned to him in all the eloquence of feminine horror and gratitude combined. He felt it was a face he could die for, so angelically sweet and winsome it looked in its childish beauty. The features were exquisitely moulded, the nose slightly aquiline; the lips as red as cherries and as tempting in their coy, gentle shape; the chin dimpled; the eyes large, brown, and of melting tenderness, surmounted by the most delicately-pencilled brows. The whole was framed as in an aureole by a mass of glossy, wavy fair hair, no longer confined and concealed by the ridiculous nets worn at the period by ladies of fashion, with the long-eared, flapping, or lofty, conical sugar-loaf head-dresses.

Geoffrey knew at once when he heard her name that she was a daughter of the Governor of Castle Rising, just as he had recognized the name of Rupert de Mowbray, the only son of Sir Eustace de Mowbray, the lord of Hunstanton. He had never seen either of them before to his knowledge; but, needless to say, he had heard much of them as belonging to the most important families in the neighbourhood of Lynn.

'Nay, gracious lady,' he made answer, blushing up

to the roots of his hair again, and casting down his eyes, 'I need no thanks for the service I am happy in having been able to render thee. 'Twas but what Master Rupert de Mowbray or any other gentleman would ha' readily done had he had the opportunity.'

'Ah! Rupert met with a grave accident or I should never ha' been placed in the jeopardy I was. How is he? He be not seriously hurted, I trust?'

'Nay, gracious lady. He hath recovered his senses, I did hear, and be little the worse for his misadventure,' answered Geoffrey, experiencing a slight pang of jealousy at her evident concern for the young gallant who had ridden with her in the chase—forgetting, foolish lad, she had not been a true woman else: that it was but natural she should feel so.

'Ha! here cometh Rupert to speak for himself. And thank thee also, gentle youth,' the girl cried the next moment, as Rupert de Mowbray came up.

'I owe thee thanks, young sir, for thy rescue of the Lady Sybil here,' greeted the young fellow, who wore the silver spurs of a squire, the next grade or rank above a page, and the intermediate one to knighthood. 'Thy name, I hear, is Geoffrey Halford, and thou'rt page to his Grace the Prince of Wales?'

'Thou hast been rightly informed, Master Squire,' returned Geoffrey, bowing to hide the flush of indignant heat that rose to his brow at the other's haughty and somewhat resentful demeanour. 'But I need no thanks, as I have told the Lady Sybil herself, for the service it was only my fortunate lot to be in a position to render her.'

Rupert de Mowbray looked daggers at the youth before him, evidently seeming to consider the latter's rejoinder as a presumptuous one. He was several inches taller and much broader-built than Geoffrey, as became his two years' seniority; and he had a proud, stern, handsome face that bespoke more than average intelligence, besides a bold, courageous, and determined, if rather headstrong and obstinate, nature.

Superciliously eyeing the young page up and down, he turned to Lady Sybil; and offering her his hand, said:

'I am pleased to see you are none the worse for our

wretched misadventure, Sybil. Come, permit me to assist you to mount, sith you will not make use of the litter the attendants have prepared.'

The girl took his proffered hand, but with a glance expressive of disapprobation, and said with a most radiant smile to Geoffrey:

'I trust to see thee again, good Master Halford—for, of course, you will be in attendance on his Grace at my father's castle.'

Geoffrey bowed in return, but made no reply, and turned away to rejoin the group about the prince.

'To horse! To horse!' called out the boy prince, when he saw the Lady Sybil had mounted. 'We will return with all speed to the castle, for Lady Sybil Penthony will, doubtless, need a rest after her exciting experience.'

Geoffrey rode close behind his lord, as he had been bidden, and was once again the recipient of haughty, resentful, and supercilious glances from his fellow-pages and the scarcely less youthful squires. The Black Prince laughed and chatted with Sir John Chandos and the other knights about him for some distance, the train proceeding at an easy canter. But presently he turned his head and called out:

'Come hither, Geoffrey Halford. Ride beside me! Thy parents then have consented to thy becoming my page and accompanying me to France? Thy father hath not been churl enow, I trust, to gainsay my wishes on the matter?'

''Tis even as your Grace supposes,' replied Geoffrey, pricking his palfrey forward, amid the baleful looks of those around him. 'My father would not say nay, even an he might, to the expressed wish of his liege-lord, and he be only too conscious of the high honour conferred upon his son, and himself through that son, my prince.'

'Now, was not that well said, gentlemen?' laughed the prince. 'Geoffrey Halford, 'tis evident thou wert meant for better things than helping thy father to pour ale down the throats of the thirsty, guzzling villeins and hinds. Thou hast already got thy tongue attuned to courtly phrases. Well, well, thou hast too, withal,

proved thy mettle in the chase and in succouring a lady fair in sore need. Thou shalt, furthermore, have an opportunity in the lists to-morrow of showing how thou canst shape in the joust or the tournament. There is to be a combined joust and tournament at Castle Riding, in which only squires and pages will compete. Thou must break a lance—but I was forgetting. Mayhap thou hast never lifted one yet? '

' Yea, and it please your Grace, I have. I have tilted with lances and bucklers of wood against other lads of my own age many times and oft, as well as being accounted quick and good at the quintain.'

' Sayest thou so? Good! It pleaseth me much to hear it. I must match thee in the joust with one of thy fellow-pages, and I choose thee now to fight on my side in the tournament. Rupert de Mowbray commands our adversaries. Let Master Mowbray attend me,' he called out aloud. ' He is with the Lady Sybil Penthony, I presume,' smiling. ' I would fain speak with him.'

Rupert soon rode up.

' Your Grace sent for me?' he asked, glancing not at the prince, but at Geoffrey in a peculiarly aggressive, insulting way.

' I did. It was to hear your account of how the accident occurred to you and the Lady Sybil. You have already spoken with your young rescuer here, methinks.'

' I have, your Grace. It happened thuswise—the accident. I called to the Lady Sybil to " 'ware tusks," when the boar turned at bay, and charged. But my horse shied aside, causing my spear to strike against and glance round a tree trunk. I was flung out of the saddle, and must have struck my head against the tree or a stone, for I remember no more until the attendants brought me round.'

' You certainly owe your preservation, and the Lady Sybil hers also, to Master Halford's bravery and presence of mind. I have chosen him to tilt on my side against yours in the lists to-morrow. Who among ye,' he asked, raising his voice again and turning to the assembled pages, ' will break a lance in the joust with your new comrade? '

'So please your Grace I shall be happy to.'

'And I!'

'And I!'

'Thou didst speak first, Cyril Branscombe, so thou it shall be.'

The youth addressed was perhaps a year older than Geoffrey, and if anything, a shade taller, while certainly much thicker-set. He was not, however, what would be called a handsome lad. His features were rather of the pudding order. He had a very large head, a small, insignificant snub nose, very small eyes set over close together, a large mouth, and larger outstanding ears that positively refused to be hidden by his long hair. And for all his extravagantly rich, dandified attire, he cut anything but an elegant or graceful figure as he sat his well-groomed palfrey. The tight-fitting, parti-coloured hose in his case did *not* show off the lower limbs to advantage.

Geoffrey recognized this individual as a page he had noticed making what were undoubtedly disparaging and sneering remarks to the others about him — probably making merry over and belittling his plain, rustic home-spun and shaggy little mount. He could not help feeling a delightful thrill of anticipatory triumph, as he gazed steadily, contemptuously, into the mocking, derisive little pig's eyes of his would-be opponent, and said:

'I will gladly break a lance with thee, friend.'

'The pleasure will be mutual,' sneered Master Branscombe, turning his little snub nose even higher than Nature had turned it for him. And yet the moment after, as he fell back again respectfully to the rear of his prince, he looked with some anxiety upon his prospective antagonist, as though half regretting his hasty acceptance of the challenge.

The Black Prince once more entered into conversation with Chandos and the other knights, and, taking this as his dismissal, Geoffrey also suffered his palfrey to drop behind, and joined the pages and squires. They all kept aloof from him, chatting merrily enough among themselves, but taking no notice whatever of him, clearly desirous of letting him see his room was preferable to his company. He made the rest of the journey to Rising

in silence, gloomily anticipating a not very pleasant time of it from those with whom he was thrown.

Entering the village from the south-west side, the hunting train clattered over the moss-mortared cobble stones between the picturesque little cottages, heavily framed with oak, past the green with its handsome stone cross, that stands to this day, and the old Norman church, and ascended the gentle slope of the low eminence on which the castle stood. The base of this hillock was cut and altered so as to make it the more defensive. It was partly enclosed by a series of grassy embankments or earthen outworks, forming a sort of outer bailey or ballium within. The crest of the hill was surmounted by another inner ring of still higher and more imposing earthworks, completely hedging round the castle. From without, only the battlements of the bare and grim old Norman keep showed; and around these inner earthworks flowed a wide and deep moat, fed with water from a neighbouring rivulet. The place, therefore, differed greatly from the ordinary run of fortresses of the period, the *exterior* wall of which was enclosed by the moat, as also in that immense mounds of earth here took the place of solid masonry. It would have made, under these circumstances, a strong defensive post even at the present day, when siege artillery would be brought to bear upon it. The moat, too, was spanned by a stone bridge, instead of the usual draw-bridge, but the head of this was guarded by the usual machicolated and portcullised barbican, flanked by turrets. This barbican, topping as it did the outer ring of earthworks, commanded a wide view all round, and served as a watch-tower.

The Black Prince and his retinue wound their horns as they approached, and were saluted in a like manner by the archers and warders on the inner rampart. Passing through the barbican archway, beneath the teeth of the portcullis, or herse, they crossed the bridge and entered the inner bailey under a Norman gatehouse. Geoffrey Halford gazed curiously and with a feeling akin to awe upon his surroundings.

Before him, 'gaunt, grey, and square,' rose up the great massive Norman keep, towering high and isolated —the very embodiment of rugged strength and armed

force, and the prevailing idea of the times that might was right. It exhibited all the characteristics of Norman architecture; heavy, solid masonry of squared stone work: semi-circular arches over the door and upper windows, buttresses of great breadth, but projecting so little from the wall as to partake of the character of pilasters and blind arcades with interlaced arches. The windows were few and were mostly only chinks or loop-holes, except when high up; and the portal, which faced east, was built outside the main building and covered in with equally solid, but somewhat more elaborately ornamented and moulded, masonry. Around the bailey or court were scattered smaller, detached buildings—various offices and the quarters of the garrison. On the west side, half hidden by shrubbery, was a decaying but still fairly well-preserved Saxon chapel.

Lounging about the grass were numerous squires and knights, pages, and men-at-arms, gossiping and laughing in subdued tones; and over all, upon the loftiest tower of the stately fortalice, flaunted and flapped in the breeze, side by side with the red cross of St. George, the royal standard of England, quartered with the fleur de lis, or three golden lilies of France, as well as the leopards of the house of Plantagenet.

V

AT CASTLE RISING

King Edward himself came out of the portal of the keep, dressed in flowing robes trimmed with deep ermine, and wearing a black silk liripoop, or round cap, adorned with long, jagged tails or scarf-like tippets. These would have hung down almost to his feet had they not been negligently thrown, like a Spanish lady's rebozo, round the shoulders. He was attended by the governor of the castle, Sir Henry Penthony, besides his lords and gentlemen, all in their gayest apparel.

'Welcome back, my son!' cried the monarch. 'Thou hast returned safely, then? By'r lakin, though thou wert escorted by stout Sir John there and other trusty knights, knowing thy dauntless and daring spirit, I had fears for thy safety. The chase of the wild boar is different to that of the stag; and I'll warrant me, thou wert well to the fore at the kill!'

'Nay, there you are wrong, father. I was left wofully out of the finish, through my horse stumbling and nigh throwing me, when Sir John insisted on my riding at a more leisurely pace. But we have had a rare run; natheless, it came near ending in a tragedy. Young Rupert de Mowbray and your fair daughter, Sir Henry, turned the quarry to bay in a wood, and the beast caused the overthrow of Master Rupert, and gored the Lady Sybil's palfrey.'

'Oh, my child! She is hurt, perchance dying!' exclaimed Sir Henry, springing forward in wild anxiety and dismay.

'Nay, nay, Sir Henry; she is quite unhurt. Think you I would wear so blithe a demeanour had we met with such a calamity? But she owes her life to my new

page yonder, Geoffrey Halford. He did first cripple the furious brute with a well-aimed arrow, and then kill it with Rupert de Mowbray's broken spear. And here cometh the damsel to bear out my assertion she is none the whit the worse for her misadventure.'

Sir Henry ran forward and assisted his daughter to dismount.

'And what of my son?' concernedly inquired the lord of Hunstanton.

'I am all right, father,' answered Rupert de Mowbray. 'I was thrown against a tree by my steed—a wanion on the timid brute!—shying aside as the boar charged, else had his Grace a different tale to tell, and the quarry fallen by my hand.'

'My anxieties for the safety of thee and thine, my noble boy, were then very well founded,' said the King. 'Thou must curb that headstrong nature of thine, Edward lad, or it may cause thee to break thy neck one day.'

'What would you have me do, father?' laughed the Black Prince merrily. 'Leave others to carry off the palms of victory? Nay, then, I wot well thou wouldst not like to see me bested in the chase, any more than in the tilting match.'

He sprang from his horse, which Cyril Branscombe, who had already dismounted, at once ran forward to take.

'Attend me to my chamber, Geoffrey,' ordered the young prince, 'and receive thy first instructions in thy new office. Mortloe, Branscombe, and Arveley, I will send for you when I want you. I may have my new page, father. His parents throw no obstacles in the way, and he may serve with me and accompany me to France, as he so listeth.'

The King only laughed, and, leaning on the shoulder of his gallant son, led the way inside the keep. Geoffrey followed amidst the splendid train of nobles, squires, and other pages.

They ascended the stone staircase to the guard-room on the first floor, through which lay the main entrance to the banqueting hall. A small oaken door to the right of this led up a flight of stone steps immersed in a

deep twilight, into a corridor hung with tapestry, and lighted by deep-set, mullioned casements. Opening off this corridor were the state apartments; and here the prince and the King parted, and the latter entered those reserved for his use, accompanied by his lords-in-waiting, while the young Prince of Wales, beckoning to Geoffrey to follow, went on into another suite of rooms.

The new page—used, as he had been all his life, to the plain and very meagrely-furnished rooms of his father's inn, to floors strewn with rushes, seldom changed, and low, smoke-stained ceilings—was amazed at the luxury of the apartment into which he was now introduced.

The afternoon sun and fragrant summer air entered through the open windows of stained glass bearing the royal escutcheon. A carpet,* soft and fleecy, and richly worked and edged with designs in gold and silver thread, occupied the middle of the floor, leaving bare only a small strip of oak, polished till it was as smooth and reflective as a mirror. Arras of blue velvet—likewise embroidered with gold and silver and richly-coloured threads in numerous pretty devices — draped the high panelled wainscots, and the tall stately chairs of carved oak were upholstered in deep crimson and azure velvet and satin. There were little tables of the same elaborate pattern; and the great open fireplace, with its tall andirons of polished brass, was filled with logs that, however, were unlighted, on account of the season. Gold and beautifully wrought and chased candelabra, containing wax candles—then a most expensive luxury, and only sparingly used by the richest—stood upon the side-tables.

Opening off this gorgeous apartment was one no less magnificent, the chief furniture of which was a large four-post bedstead, with hangings, and canopy of red velvet, embroidered with the royal arms, and surmounted with white ostrich plumes.

No wonder the breath of the poor innkeeper's son

* Carpets were introduced into England during the Crusades, but were only to be found in royal bedrooms up to Elizabeth's time. Rushes were strewn on the floors in Hampton Court, built by Cardinal Wolsey.

was taken away for the time being by this lavish display of wealth and comfort. He was recalled to himself by the prince addressing him :

' Geoffrey, I ha' brought thee to the privacy of mine own apartments, and dismissed the squire and other pages, that so I may speak a few words with thee, unheard by any. Hearken to me ! To fit thee out with raiment suitable to thy degree, and enable thee in every way to sustain the dignity of thy office, thou wilt need money, of course. I will grant thee, therefore, the equivalent of a " knight's fee," or, in other words, twenty pounds per annum. With this largesse, of course, you will be expected later to purchase the necessary land to that amount; but time enow for that.

' You may not wot of the conditions of knight's service, but under the tenure of land for the amount stated, or in return for my bounty, to put it plainer, you will be bound to attend your lord to the wars for forty days in every year, if called upon.'

' O most noble and generous prince, I ask no greater boon than to follow thee and serve thee all my life.'

The boy prince smiled in gratified vanity.

' I was referring to the hour when thou shalt wear the golden spurs of a knight, and be free to go whithersoever thou listest, and to enlist under the banner of whatsoever English lord thou dost please. Whilst serving thy apprenticeship to the arts of war and the customs of chivalry, thou wilt, of course, have to remain in attendance on me, or forgo all hope of ever attaining the coveted belt and spurs of knighthood. Now come with me into my bedroom and receive thy first lessons in thy new duties.'

Then passing into the adjoining chamber, and, at the young prince's bidding, Geoffrey took from an exquisitely-carved oaken chest two complete suits of Court raiment.

' Take that one into the outer apartment and put it on. 'Tis thy lord's first gift to thee, and thou wilt wear it in waiting on me at supper to-day and until we return to Windsor, when thou canst procure other changes.'

' Oh, my lord, how can I thank thee for thy kindness? ' responded the overjoyed page.

He was moving from the room, when the prince again spoke:

'Thou mayst return to the guard-room thereafter, and await me there with Masters Branscombe and Arveley, thy brother pages in my service. Tell Master Reginald Mortloe, my squire, I want him.'

Geoffrey bowed and withdrew, drawing the tapestry across the archway behind him. He was enraptured with the richness of his new costume, and lost no time in donning it.

The tunic or doublet was of black velvet, edged with golden tissue, and worked all over with the same in fanciful flowery patterns. It was slashed and turned back on the breast to show the vest of grass-green silk, bearing the royal cognisance; and the open maunch-sleeves also displayed the royal insignia and hung in scalloped tails almost to his ankles. His hose were of black silk, and, clinging like tights on a second skin, showed off the shapely limbs they covered to the utmost advantage. The rest of his garb consisted of a green velvet cap with a white feather, a belt of the softest doe-skin embroidered with gold, silver, and purple thread, a pouch to match with a small toy dagger, both haft and sheath of which were handsomely ornamented, and tight-fitting, pointed shoes, likewise of doeskin, covered with beadwork and seedling pearls.

The innkeeper's son hardly knew himself in such glittering attire; and it was with rather an awkward gait that he opened the door leading into the corridor, and took his way back along this to the guardroom. As the prince was about his build, and the garments all laced up, and were drawn in by the belt, they fitted him as if made specially for him.

As he opened the door of the guardroom, the low murmur of voices that filled it was hushed, and all eyes turned upon him inquiringly, so that he coloured with embarrassment, and was unpleasantly self-conscious of the newness and new ownership of his clothes. The chamber was thronged to overflowing with gaily-attired squires and pages, all waiting to be summoned to the presence of their lords, or to attend these into the dining-hall. About half a dozen yeomen of the castle guard—

stout, heavily built rough fellows, with great brown-bills or pole-axes—were also present, sitting on the benches; and we must not overlook a most curious-looking piebald figure.

This last individual was clad in a jerkin, all tags and tassels, and of two kinds of cloth, the right side being blue, and the left red. His hose were similarly parti-coloured, though the positions were reversed to contrast with the jerkin. Every point into which his grotesque garb was cut was adorned with a hawk-bell, so that like the old lady in the nursery rhyme, who had 'bells on her fingers and bells on her toes,' he had music wherever he went. His shoes were turned up at the pointed toes* in a ridiculous way, so that he could easily have tied their ends round his ankles. On his head was a bright yellow cap, with a peak, also bearing a bell, hanging down on either side like asses' ears, and surmounted by a red serrated crest or cock's comb, spelt at the time 'coxcomb,' a word handed down to us with a somewhat analogous meaning. In his hand he held the 'bauble,' a short staff with a head carved on it resembling his own and adorned with a similar cap, and a scalloped cape, hung with small bells.

This strange individual was the King's jester, or paid fool.

'Heigho! But our fresh-fish of a new-fledged page *is* decked out,' cried Cyril Branscombe in a loud, mocking voice, as Geoffrey diffidently entered. 'Methinks though,' he added, with a sneering laugh, 'thy cap and bells, Barnaby, would ha' become him better than such raiment.'

There was a snigger from some of the younger pages at this greeting, and one or two of the squires smiled. Rupert de Mowbray glowered upon the newcomer, however, in his usual haughty, aggressive way. Geoffrey reddened still more, and with smouldering eyes walked across to Cyril, who visibly shrank and eyed him rather concernedly.

* The long, pointed toes had temporarily gone out of fashion; Edward III and his grandfather did not favour the silly effeminacy. They were, however, carried to a greater length, in a double sense, under Richard II.

'Have a care, Master Branscombe,' he said in low but distinct tones that were heard by all. 'This attire is the present of his Grace, the Prince of Wales. I should advise thee not to try to throw ridicule either at it or its wearer.'

'Hoity-toity!' exclaimed Cyril, shrinking still further back from the other's irate, blazing eyes, but attempting to cover himself by an affected surprise and indignation. 'Here's a young frapler for ye, an ye like!'

'I am no frapler, for I have done no blustering or bullying, but thou art, certes, a frappet, or the making of a bully,' retorted Geoffrey, 'and I bid thee have a care, for I am not the sort to put up with *thy* fresh-fish efforts at the game.'

'Well hit! well hit!' cried Barnaby, the jester. 'Now that is what I call an excellent play upon words. By my troth, I doubt an I could ha' framed a wittier reply myself, though it be my business to have a jest or quip ever on my lips.'

'Said I not right then,' asked Cyril, with an uneasy grin, turing to those around, 'when I said the cap and bells of a buffoon would ha' become him better than his present raiment?'

'Nay, friend, good Barnaby's coxcomb would suit thy noddle better, for of a verity thou art a coxcomb who wants his cock's comb cutting; and, withal, such headgear would admirably match thy name, Master Cyril Branscombe.'

He drawled out the last word in a way there was no mistaking the drift of, as he made an ironical bow and turned away. A burst of laughter at Cyril's expense greeted this wordy victory; and Master Branscombe scowled, but wisely forbore to again challenge his brother-page's wit. He turned to his tittering cronies, tittering no longer with him, and tried to pass off his reverse with a sickly smile, and muttered a remark Geoffrey could not hear.

Geoffrey went up to Master Mortloe, whom he remembered, and said:

'His Grace sent me for thee, sir squire. He desires thee to attend him forthwith in his apartments.'

'Thou art a new addition to my charge, Master

Halford,' replied Mortloe, who was a handsome, stalwart young fellow of nineteen, with a frank, honest face. 'I trow we shall get on well together. I like thee, for thy spirit; and the way thou didst score on Cyril was excellent.'

And, with an approving nod, the prince's squire went off to obey the summons. Geoffrey felt pleased to think he had made one friend at least among his new, birth-proud associates. He now approached the archers of the guard.

'Prithee, Master Vintenar,'* he said, addressing their officer, who was sitting on one of the benches, 'canst direct me to where I may find the Lady Alicia Crosbie?'

'Ay, surely, young master,' replied the huge, rough fellow in gruff but hearty tones, for he had been a pleased auditor to the youth's passage-at-arms with Cyril Branscombe, and had chuckled deep, along with his comrades, over the utter overthrow of the latter. 'She be with her Majesty. Master de Molines yonder be her Majesty the Queen-Mother's page. He will take the message for thee.'

A young page on this separated himself from Branscombe's companions, and advanced towards Geoffrey.

'Thou hast a message for the Lady Alicia. From whom?' he asked, insolently.

'That concerns thee not, my friend. If thou wilt not inform the lady I wish to see her or conduct me to her, I must needs find another messenger.'

Barnaby the jester, who had been intently regarding Geoffrey the whole time, though in a covert sort of way, gave a violent start, and looked still more keenly, and this time openly, at the youth, on mention of the name of the lady he wished to see.

'Give me thy message,' growled Master de Molines, glaring at Geoffrey as if he would annihilate that presumptuous youth with a glance.

'I may not. My instructions were to give it into no hands but the lady's own.'

Master de Molines' demeanour underwent a sudden

* A vintenar was an inferior officer of foot soldiers. He commanded twenty men, and was so named from the French *vingt*, twenty.

change. He supposed at once the message came from the King or the Prince of Wales.

'I will apprise the Lady Alicia. Thy name be Geoffrey Halford?'

'It is.'

Master de Molines disappeared through the doorway Geoffrey had just entered the guardroom by. But he had not gone two minutes when he returned and said curtly, without looking at our hero, but crossing towards his late companions:

'The Lady Alicia Crosbie is just coming down. If you ascend the stairs to the floor above, you will find her outside her Dowager Majesty's chamber.'

VI

GEOFFREY MEETS 'THE DARK LADY'

Geoffrey Halford mounted the stone stairway to the floor above, as directed. A long tapestried, flagged corridor was before him. It was dimly lighted behind him, and at the further end by a window, and he saw several doors opening off it; but the lady he sought was not to be seen.

He walked several paces down the corridor, his light shoes making no noise upon the flags, to the first door upon his left hand. It stood slightly ajar, and through the crack he caught a glimpse of an arras-covered wall and a rush-bestrewn floor. The murmur of voices reached him from inside.

'Farewell then, gentle Geoffrey,' the lad was surprised to hear a female voice say. 'I trust wholly in thee. Carry my message to my dear cousin, and look to it he does not let the young viper escape his clutches this time.'

'Farewell, sweet madam, and rest assured Geoffrey d'Arcourt will not fail thee,' replied a deep, masculine voice, with a pronounced foreign accent.

Our page was about to skip nimbly back to escape the imputation of eavesdropping, when the door was suddenly flung wide and a lady in long sweeping garments appeared. She started back with a low cry of mingled horror and consternation at sight of the lad, pulled the door quickly half-to beside her, and whispered back round it:

'Stay! One of the pages.'

Then she stepped into the corridor, carefully shutting the door behind her, and confronted the youth with a stern, lowering countenance, her eyes searching his countenance by the half light keenly, suspiciously, and withal somewhat fearfully.

'Thou hast a message for me?' she said in low, sibilant tones. 'But what meanest thou by listening at doors in this manner? I ha' a good mind to report thee to thy royal master for such a breach of etiquette. What didst hear?'

And she suddenly pounced upon Geoffrey, gripped him tightly by one arm, and drew him round so that the light from the nearer window might fall upon his features.

'I know thee not,' she muttered in a puzzled tone, gazing at him intently 'Who art thou? Thy name? Thou bearest the cognizance of his Grace, the Prince ——'

She started violently, and stared wildly at him now, breathing hard through her parted lips and with her bosom heaving tumultuously.

'Merciful powers! Am I dreaming? It is *his* face. Who—who art thou, boy? Thy name—thy name?' And her grip upon his arm tightened to almost a painful extent.

Geoffrey stared back at her, amazed, dumbfounded, by her behaviour.

'Thy name! Who art thou?' repeated the lady, giving him a rude shake. 'Hast thou lost thy wits completely, boy, that thou answerest me not?'

'My—name is Geoffrey Halford, madam. I am the prince's new page, and—and I have a letter for thee from my father, Roger Halford, who keeps the White Hart hostelry in Lynn, an so be thou art the Lady Alicia Crosbie.'

'Halford—Roger Halford of the White Hart! I was not mistaken then. No wonder I was startled. The—the features are the same. Powers above! what has brought him here? He is the prince's new page, he saith. There—there is fate in this. Can all be discovered?' the lady murmured in the deepest agitation, her clutch on Geoffrey's arm shaking as if she had the palsy.

But suddenly awaking to the fact that the lad was viewing her in the greatest surprise, she controlled herself with an effort.

'Thou hast a letter for me from thy father?' she

said, pressing one hand upon her bosom, and releasing him. 'That may perchance explain. Give it me!'

'Thou art the Lady Alicia Crosbie?' hesitated Geoffrey, holding back the letter. 'My father enjoined me strictly to deliver it to none other, madam.'

'That is my name. The letter—the letter!'

Geoffrey handed over the letter without further parley. She took it with fingers that were visibly trembling, and tore off the sealed cover impatiently. A look of the deepest anxiety overspread her face as she drew still nearer the window to read the missive; but it quickly vanished, and was replaced by one of evident relief. The letter seemed very long, and she kept darting penetrating glances at its bearer as she waded through it. Geoffrey had leisure to observe her more closely.

She looked about thirty, although she might have been more, and her features were cast in the most perfect mould of the beauty generally associated with Jewesses. Her hair was black as night, and her eyes were of the same hue, and intensely piercing. A covert sneer seemed to play habitually about the rather thin lips.

There came the noise of an opening door; and, looking up quickly from her reading, she seized Geoffrey again by the arm and drew him back beside the wall, where there was a small recess. Swift as was her action, Geoffrey had time to see a tall, stately woman of middle age, robed in black velvet, with gold and silver tissue, and lace, and flashing jewels, advance half way into the passage from the door of the Dowager Queen's apartment, and stand there looking towards them as if to cover the retreat in the opposite direction of a man in rich Court attire, with black, curly hair, and beard. The lad remembered the gallant as the foreign-looking knight the King had addressed as 'My Lord D'Arcourt,' just before the charge upon the ambush on Rising Heath; and he needed no telling that the majestic, black-robed matron was the embodiment of his childish chimera, the dread 'Dark Lady of Rising,' the Dowager Queen Isabella.

'The page hath not gone, then, Lady Alicia,' called out this paragon of wickedness in a surprised and angry tone.

'Nay, but, madam, I was just dismissing him,' replied her waiting-lady.

'I would speak with him ere you do so.'

What were Geoffrey's feelings, as he heard this intimation, and saw the Queen Mother advancing towards him, it would be hard to conjecture. He looked upon her as a fiend in woman's form, and well he might. She was the Queen whom Gray in his poem, 'The Bard,' designates as the 'She Wolf of France,' the faithless wife of Edward II, surnamed *La Belle,* or 'the handsome,' the reigning monarch's mother, shut up for the term of her natural life within those castle walls by her son for her undoubted complicity in the diabolical murder of his father.

She exchanged a glance full of questioning with Lady Alicia as she came up, whilst she addressed herself to Geoffrey.

'Thou art one of the prince's pages? What is thy name, fair youth?'

'His name is Halford, Geoffrey Halford, gracious madam,' Lady Alicia said, before the lad himself could make answer, shaking her head and pursing out her lips significantly. 'He is the son of an old friend of mine, and hath but entered the noble young prince's service to-day. He is quite unused to Court etiquette, which I must urge as an excuse for his trespassing so close to a lady's bower chamber, and that lady of all others, the King's mother,' she added, with a slight smile, meant to be reassuring, at our young page. 'Her Majesty was receiving a gentleman from the King; and I trust your ears, Master Geoffrey, caught naught of what was said. 'Tis unsafe for pages to have long ears, gentle youth, and to listen at doors in royal residences. What didst hear? Out with the truth now, an thou wouldst not come under our displeasure and that of thy royal master.'

Isabella fastened a fierce glare on the abashed youth.

'Ay! the truth, springald,' she grated, hoarsely, her dark, magnetic orbs resembling some venomous serpent's, as she studied his countenance anxiously. 'Out with the truth, or dread my ire! What didst thou hear of our conversation?'

'Nothing, gracious madam—absolutely nothing, I give you my word,' stammered Geoffrey, shrinking involuntarily from under the malignant gaze.

'Thou didst hear something. Thou must have done,' pursued the daughter of Philip IV of France. 'What was it? Thou seest thou cannot deceive me.'

She was at this time sixty-one years of age, and had been sixteen years in confinement within the castle; but she had lost very little of that fatal beauty, which had won for her the surname of 'La Belle,' and had ensnared to his and her own undoing the handsome, ambitious, and unprincipled young baron, Roger Mortimer, 'her gentle Mortimer,' as she called him. When she married her unfortunate husband she was but thirteen years old, history records, and so it is very doubtful if her inclinations were consulted at all in the matter. Her after life clearly proves, at any rate, she could have had no real affection for her husband.

Tall and majestic of figure, she still had a regal look which was accentuated by the cold, stony hauteur of the impassive face, perfect in its outline, smooth, calm, and magnificently preserved. Sorrow, passion, disappointed ambition, had left no ravages upon that mask-like face. Not as much as a wrinkle had they traced upon the white forehead or the plump, comely cheeks. Time had indeed dealt leniently with her, and Geoffrey Halford, as he gazed upon her, was amazed beyond measure, could hardly believe he stood before the faithless wife and murderess.

He had expected to see the fruits of her stormy, terrible past written in indelible furrows upon her face. Could this really be the Dark Lady? he asked himself in doubt; but the fierce, malevolent glare of the large black eyes quickly dispelled that doubt.

'Soulful' were those eyes that Geoffrey Halford was looking into—full of the wicked soul of their mistress. In them was laid bare the whole, crafty, cruel, vicious nature, which the Sphinx-like, beautifully-modelled face masked. Her dark hair betrayed no signs of turning to grey; but it was probably dyed; her double chin was dimpled; and her teeth were as even and white as a young girl's. She would have passed easily for fifteen

or sixteen years younger than she was; and it could well be imagined she might still exercise a powerful influence over many men.

'I did but hear the gentleman taking his leave, madam,' Geoffrey replied to her peremptory query.

'And callest thou that nothing?' snorted Isabella. 'What were the exact words that you heard? Repeat them!'

'I cannot truly, madam, for I minded them not,' replied the page earnestly. I merely caught the word "farewell," and as I think mine own name "Geoffrey" mentioned. I had no intention of playing the eves-dropper. Believe me; I speak the truth. Master de Molines, your Majesty's page, said I should find the Lady Alicia outside your room door. When I saw her not, I was advancing along the passage. I knew not which was your apartment, madam, but seeing the door ajar concluded that was it, and expected the lady would come forth.'

At this moment the great bell of the castle tolled to summon the household to supper.

'Nay then, gracious madam,' said Lady Alicia, giving the dowager another look of meaning, 'I firmly believe the brave lad heard naught he should not ha' done.'

'I am not so sure,' retorted the Queen-Mother, with a shake of the head, still keeping her baneful glance riveted upon Geoffrey's flushed, alarmed face. 'My mind misgives me he may be keeping the truth back.'

'Indeed, sweet lady, I am not,' assured the page.

'See then an' it be so thou dost not let thy tongue wag o' this our talk with thee. Loose tongues are better out o' their owners' heads, e'en an they have to be torn out by the roots. Heed ye! Go now, wait on thy young springald of a master, and see thou repeatest not what we ha' said to thee an thou respect thy new position.'

With that she turned on her heel, signed to Lady Alicia to accompany her, and swept away with admirable dignity to her apartment. As they went and he turned to descend the stairs, Geoffrey heard Lady Alicia say, softly:

'I am sure thou hast no cause for uneasiness, dear madam.'

Glad beyond expression to escape from his cross-examination and the presence of that dreadful woman, Geoffrey sprang quickly down the stairway and gained the guard-room before the King and the prince appeared.

The doors of the banqueting-hall stood open, and richly-attired bearers and servants were hurrying in and out at the further end, spreading the tables with silver dishes, heaped with viands of all kinds, parcel-gilt goblets, and stoups of rare wines. Most of the tables ran the length of the hall, and ranged alongside them were massive and carved oak chairs and settles. At the upper end on a raised platform or daïs, a table, covered with scarlet Flemish cloth, ran transversely; and in the middle of this, facing down the hall, was a kind of throne or state-chair of gilded oak, elaborately carved, and upholstered with crimson satin, fringed with gold.

A similar but smaller throne occupied the right-hand place beside it; and over both was a canopy of cloth of gold, with the royal arms embroidered upon it in pearls and other precious stones. The body of the hall was strewn with fresh rushes, but the daïs was carpeted with brilliantly-coloured tapestry, and the walls around were hung with trophies of the chase above the arras.

Geoffrey Halford feasted his eyes upon the magnificent scene, and for a time remained unconscious of the glittering array of waiting gentlemen, squires, pages, and minstrels around him awaiting the coming of the King and prince. Presently the door leading to the royal apartments was thrown open, and a herald announced in a loud voice:

'Gentlemen, the King!'

There was the clang of arms, as the yeomen of the guard struck the butt ends of their heavy bills in salute upon the stone-flags, and all the assembled knights, squires, and pages fell to attention. Then a major-domo, with his wand of office, appeared backwards, bowing down the stairs the monarch, leaning on the Black Prince's arm.

King Edward smiled graciously around upon the

bowing throng, and passed on with his son towards the portal of the hall. Sir Henry Penthony, the governor of the castle and his monarch's host, came next, walking beside a tall, dignified-looking noble with fair hair, light blue eyes, and features very like Geoffrey Halford's, and yet somewhat resembling Rupert de Mowbray's as well. They might well resemble the latter's, for the gentleman was his father, Sir Eustace de Mowbray, the Lord of Mowbray Castle, Hunstanton.

Behind them marched Sir John Chandos with Count Geoffrey D'Arcourt, followed by the rest of the royal train, according to rank. As they all passed into the dining-hall, the waiting lesser knights, squires, and pages around Geoffrey filed after them, and our hero went also, while the minstrels raised a loud blare of trumpets and clashed cymbals, then broke into a lively, sprightly melody.

Amid this the King and prince took their seats on the thrones upon the daïs, all the nobles and gentlemen remaining standing and glancing towards a door to the left of the hall. This opened the moment after, and two ladies, one middle-aged, the other young and beautiful, entered. They were Lady Penthony and her elder daughter, Beatrice. Behind followed the younger daughter, Sybil, and the other ladies of the household.

Geoffrey Halford could not help blushing a little at sight of the fair young girl he had rescued from the wild boar; and, as he glanced from her to her proud haughty-looking elder sister, he made a mental comparison decidedly in her favour. The Queen-Mother did not appear, nor yet the Lady Alicia Crosbie; and our page concluded they preferred to dine in solitary state in the former's own apartment on occasions like the present.

The King and the Black Prince rose gallantly at the entry of the ladies and returned their bows, not seating themselves again until the major-domo had found places for them all at the principal table. Then once more the royal pair sat down, and the gentlemen took their appointed seats at the board, the squires and pages ranging behind the chairs of their respective masters.

Geoffrey had accompanied Reginald Mortloe and his

fellow-pages, Masters Branscombe and Arveley, on to the daïs and behind the Black Prince.

'Master Arveley, thou wilt carve my meat this even,' said the boy prince; and so Geoffrey had nothing to do but look on and learn his duties at table.

VII

THE JOUSTS

The meal progressed to the music of the hautboys, lutes, and tabors of the musicians at the door of the hall, and presently they burst into a song of martial prowess. After this there came a loud shout, the clash of cymbals, and Barnaby, the King's petted buffoon, bounded in, turned a somersault, and then 'catherine-wheeled' it up the room to the daïs, where he turned another somersault, and, as he landed on his feet, made a mock obeisance to the King, waved his bauble, and cried:

'All hail, King of England! The king of Misrule, Wit, and Humour greeteth thee!'

'Thanks, royal brother,' laughed King Edward. 'But, sith, thou art a monarch, too, wherefore art thou alone and unattended? Where be thy loyal subjects?'

'Nay, but, royal gossip, all thou seest here are my subjects,' was the ready answer, 'and thou, too, loyal brother, for that matter, art my subject.'

'Go to! How dost make that out?' said King Edward, in expectation of the coming jest.

'Because thou art subject to my wit, and likewise the subject of my wit, as well as these ladies and gentlemen,' replied Barnaby. 'And, sooth, while I am on the subject I may as well say that it is better to be a subject than an object.'

With that he struck a most ridiculous attitude, which, together with his quip, elicited a roar of laughter from all present.

'There now, royal gossip,' continued the jester. 'Could any monarch ask for a better ovation from his subjects? And yet, albeit I say 'tis better to be a subject than an object, I will e'en prove to thee that a subject

is the same thing as an object—that in other words the superior is the equal of the inferior.'

'Marry come up, but thou wilt be sharp indeed, and thou canst prove that, good Barnaby.'

'That can I. An object of ridicule is often subject to ill-usage.'

There was a brief silence while all were racking their brains to see the point of the joke. Then a loud clapping betokened several saw it, and the Black Prince led off the hearty burst of laughter that went up.

'Now I will subject ye to no more of my puns, lest ye should object, and make me the object of your displeasure, and subject me to ill-usage. But I will treat you to a few acrobatic feats, doffing my dignity of monarch for the time being.'

He unbuttoned and threw down his scalloped cape.

'That's my dignity,' he said, indicating the article with a backward jerk of the thumb, provoking more laughter.

'And this is my staff of life,' he continued, laying his bauble also aside.

Then he went through some truly remarkable feats, like a modern circus clown, standing on his hands upon the back of a light chair, and then, while thus balancing, doubling forward and raising his bauble between his toes off the chair and juggling it in mid-air with his feet.

The King at last gave the signal for all to rise by doing so himself, when an adjournment was made to the state or reception-rooms, while the servants cleared the chief table, and the courtiers and pages sat down to their share of the repast. Most of the young squires sat together, and were more hilarious and boisterous than the pages. But Master Mortloe preferred to sit with Geoffrey Halford, Branscombe, and Arveley. He chatted freely and blithely with the first-mentioned throughout the meal, chiefly, of course, about the forthcoming tourney. Masters Branscombe and Arveley did not join in the conversation, but talked with their fellow-pages.

Soft, delicious strains of music came floating from the apartments to which the lords and gentlemen and ladies had withdrawn, and now and again the buzz of voices

and light peals of laughter, as the communicating doors were opened; while from the great stone hall below came the loud, deep-voiced guffaws and coarse merriment of the feasting yeomen, the archers, and men-at-arms.

The squires and pages lingered over their meal, for they were at liberty until bedtime. When this came, Geoffrey, with Mortloe and his two fellow-pages, attended the Black Prince, helped him to undress, and then, leaving him to his slumbers and the guardianship in the corridor without of a couple of stalwart archers, equipped with partisans, they sought their own sleeping-quarters. These were in a vaulted chamber upon the ground floor, which was only lighted in the daytime by a slit high up in the wall. It was now, however, illuminated by a couple of lamps of neat's-foot oil, and was by no means badly furnished. Rude hangings covered the walls, and four camp beds were ranged around, as well as two or three little curiously carved tables and settles. In the tables were various toilet articles, and there were also a couple of prie-dieux.

The four young fellows wasted very little time in talk, but undressed hurriedly. Mortloe was the first to kneel down on one of the prie-dieux and say his orisons, and Cyril Branscombe quickly followed suite. No true knight or aspirant to knightly honour would have thought of retiring to rest without praying for grace and guidance to the Great White Throne.

Geoffrey and Arveley, following the good example, also went on their knees; and then the pages got into their beds, Mortloe extinguished the last lamp, and all composed themselves for sleep. Despite the novelty of his surroundings, Geoffrey Halford was soon fast asleep, and dreaming dreams of future glory probably.

As the first rays of dawn shot in through the little aperture in the vaults, Mortloe awoke and roused his room-mates; and with many boyish quips and speculations upon the fortunes of the jousts, they all proceeded to dress.

'How feelest thou this morn, Halford?' asked Cyril Branscombe, regarding his prospective antagonist curiously. 'In good fettle for the tilt atween us?'

'Ay, I feel in right good trim. And thou?'

'Never better. I warn thee to look well to thyself, for I will not spare thee. I trust thou canst use the lance well? I would not have too easy a victory.'

'Marry, but perchance he may use his lance better than thou wilt relish, Cyril,' laughed Mortloe. 'I should not make too sure of victory over him an I were thee.'

'No, it never doth to under-estimate a foeman's mettle, doth it?' put in Arveley. 'Who art thou matched against, Rex?'

'Francois Pèrault, the Count D'Arcourt's squire, and I would not ask a better adversary, for he is three years my senior. We are of the same height and bulk or thereabouts, and I hope to roll him in the dust.'

''Twould never do to let the Frenchman beat thee, Master Mortloe,' said Geoffrey, smiling.

'No, that it wouldn't, for the honour of old England as well as mine own. England's honour is at stake, but Reginald Mortloe will do his best to uphold it, have no fear.'

'I am pitted against Lancelot de Molines,' remarked Arveley, 'so it is two Lancelots against each other.'

'Then we shall be able to acclaim Lancelot, whichever winneth,' laughed the squire.

An archer presently appeared to summon Mortloe and Geoffrey to the bed-chamber of the prince. They helped him to dress; and then he paid a visit to his father, who was still abed.

At seven o'clock the bell of the castle summoned them to breakfast. Like the supper, it was conducted with much pomp and ceremony, and the squires and pages partook after their superiors, and while these were robing in their richest attire for the jousts.

When Geoffrey and his companions went out into the bailey or courtyard, they found the lists were already put up, as well as the galleries or canopied seats on the daïs for royalty and the lords and ladies. The lists consisted of strong palisades driven into the earth, with four stout ropes passed through holes in them, enclosing an oval space, the whole of the level tract on the east side of the keep. At either extremity of the enclosure, placed somewhat to the castle side so as not to interfere with the view of the spectators there, were two large and

gaily-decorated pavilions for the combatants to arm and disarm in.

A large crowd of villagers and country people had been attracted by the news that had been noised abroad of the intended boys' joust and tourney, and had come to witness it and Royalty's pageant. They were readily admitted at the gatehouse, and passed round behind the galleries or the west side of the keep and along the gentle slope of the earthworks, which afforded an excellent view of the arena to all.

At half-past eight the jousts were to begin, and long before that time the earthworks on the east side were a sea of faces, rising tier on tier to the rampart top. The spectators extended in a half moon from the gatehouse on the north side behind and above the galleries to the opposite extremity of the lists. Presently there was a loud fanfare of trumpets, and two mounted heralds rode into the lists through an opening in them adjoining the keep on the south-east side. Six trumpeters on foot marched after them; and then came a dozen or more pursuivants, and a strong body of men-at-arms with sloped brown bills. The heralds disposed the pursuivants and men-at arms all round the lists to maintain order and prevent the populace pressing too closely upon the ropes, if not invading the enclosure itself.

And now the knights and nobles of the royal train appeared from the door of the keep, accompanied by the ladies of Sir Henry Penthony's household, all laughing and chatting blithely and bowing and curtsying to each other; the gentlemen in long, rich-tinted mantles and their fair companions in gay bejewelled robes. They took their places in the galleries around the royal thrones and canopies. These galleries, of course, were only temporary affairs, their rude scaffolding being hidden beneath the tapestries and carpets. Awnings overspread them, and innumerable banners, pennons, and escutcheons added to their gala appearance.

There were three thrones, but two far exceeded in decoration the third. One of these two was evidently for the King, as signified by the royal arms emblazoned on the canopy over it.

But, strange to say, it was not the other, but the less

sumptuous third throne that bore the cognizance of the Prince of Wales. Who, then, was to occupy the second throne? A large and handsomely painted inscription on the front of the silken canopy over it announced that it was meant for 'the Queen of Love and Beauty.'

By the side of this throne were a number of village girls clad all in white and with garlands of flowers upon their heads, as well as four very young pages attired in the most picturesque light blue costumes — costumes something after the style of 'Little Boy Blue.' They were to form the train of whomsoever among the ladies gracing the jousting with their presence should be chosen, by the squire or page declared the victor, to occupy the throne and reign as the Queen of Love and Beauty.

A loud blare of trumpets announced the coming of the royal party, and the assembled throng ceased its laughter and talk, and then burst into enthusiastic plaudits, clapping hands, and cheering lustily, as the war-like Edward issued from the keep in his robes of state. He walked side by side with Sir Henry Penthony, preceded by the major-domo, with wand of office, walking backward and bowing low at every few steps, and was followed by the gallant Black Prince, on whose arm leaned Lady Penthony. Behind came the rest of the retinue, headed by Count Geoffrey D'Arcourt, arm-in-arm with fair, stately Beatrice Penthony. Her sister followed on the arm of the brave old knight, Sir John Chandos.

Across the lists they all passed, and entered the royal gallery, the populace not ceasing their shouts of 'Long live King Edward!' until all were seated within it, and the monarch took up his baton.

At this signal the heralds rode forward into the centre of the arena, and, after a preliminary fanfare on their trumpets, proclaimed that the morning would be devoted to a joust, the victor of which would have the privilege of choosing and crowning a 'Queen of Beauty' from among the ladies present, and receive as prizes, a war-horse of superior strength and beauty, and a complete suit of mail, as well as arms, a lance, mace, and sword. The rules of the joust were then explained at length; the heralds and trumpeters withdrew to one side of the

list, and two knights who were to act as marshals, armed from head to heel, and mounted on ponderous war-horses, caraçoled together into the lists, saluted the King, and, resting the butts of their lances on their thighs, pranced to either end of the enclosure. There they took up their positions, sitting their steeds as motionless as statues.

Once more the trumpeters sounded their instruments, and the heralds called out in loud voices the names of the first two combatants.

'Master Reginald Mortloe, esquire to His Grace the Prince of Wales, will break a lance with Master Francois Pèrault, esquire to the most noble count of France, Geoffrey D'Arcourt. Come forth—come forth, gallant sirs, and do battle in all true courtesy and honour for the future 'Queen of Love and Beauty.'

Forth from the pavilion at the northern extremity of the lists strode Reginald, clad in light but complete armour, with the visor of his helmet up. Behind him came Geoffrey Halford, bearing his lance and shield; Lancelot Arveley leading his horse, which wore no armour; and a dozen other pages and squires, all more or less in steel harness, in preparation for their turn. At the same time the Count D'Arcourt's squire appeared from the opposite tent.

Springing into the saddle, the two combatants closed their visors, and received their lances and shields. Then they saluted the King by caraçoling their horses halfway towards him and bowing and lowering their lances; after which they backed to their respective ends of the enclosure. There they sat their horses and couched their lances in readiness for the word to charge each other, while the spectators held their breaths and eagerly eyed the champions.

'Thy squire will not name the Queen of Beauty, your Grace,' laughed the Count D'Arcourt. 'Francois, I trow, will make short work of him. The youth is the equal of many a knight in the tilting match, and he hath the advantage of Master Mortloe by two full years at least.'

'Nay, but I fear me for thy squire, Count,' returned the boy prince with a dry smile. 'Master Mortloe is no

novice with the lance, and can hold his own with the best.'

'It is England against France!' yelled some of the crowd. 'Old England for ever! A Mortloe! A Mortloe! The prince's squire! The prince's squire! Crop the foreigner's crest for him! Show him he's no match for the English lad!'

'Fair play! Fair play!' called out others, more generously. 'Let the better man win — English or French. Fall on, and prove your mettle, lads!'

A flourish of trumpets, and once more silence. Then the voice of one of the marshals thundered forth.

'*Laissez aller!*' (Let them go!)

Instantly Mortloe and his opponent put spurs to their mettlesome steeds, and dashed their shields well before them, their lances gripped tightly for the shock. The lance points were blunted by round flat buttons of wood called 'rockets,' so that they could inflict no injury, beyond the jar of the collision; and the rule was that no combatant might aim at other than the body or head of his foe.

Crash! The two adversaries met with a terrific shock, immediately in front of the royal box, and the lances of both combatants flew around in fragments. But, while Reginald Mortloe retained his saddle, and his horse only sank upon his haunches, Francois Pèrault and his steed were sent rolling over and over upon the green, the rider one way, the ridden another.

'Hurrah! England for ever! The Frenchman's worsted! The prince's squire for ever!' yelled the crowd in high glee at the result of the joust.

The Black Prince turned with a triumph he could not conceal to the Count D'Arcourt, who gnawed his nether lip in chagrin and vexation.

'Thou seest, my lord, I did not over-estimate my squire's prowess,' he said.

'Which meaneth, I take it, your Grace, that I did mine,' was D'Arcourt's rather nettled rejoinder. 'But thou dost forget that the most skilful may fail in the lists through lack of good fortune.'

'Nay, nay, do not show thyself ungenerous, Count,' smiled the King, reproving his exultant son with a

glance. ' 'Twas a right good tilt, and both lads did their best, methinks.'

Mortloe curveted his horse back to his pavilion; and Geoffrey and other pages ran forward to collect the broken fragments of the lances, while Pèrault picked himself up, seized his trembling charger's bridle, and returned with it to receive the condolences of the other competitors using the same tent.

Again the trumpets sounded, and the heralds announced the names of the next two opponents. To the shock the pair dashed, and this time the victor was the representative of Rupert de Mowbray's side, for as many taking part in the jousts were also to fight in the *mêlée*, the pavilions marked the partisans.

With varying success the jousting went on. Lances were shivered, and the boyish combatants hurled from their saddles in rapid succession, amid the enthusiastic acclamations of the spectators. Whenever a candidate displayed superior dexterity either in the use of his weapon and the overthrow of his adversary, or in causing his horse to keep up after the shock, the plaudits were deafening, and the ladies waved scarves and gloves, or threw flowers to him.

More than one youth was flung, stunned and bleeding, to earth, and had to be carried by the attendants from the arena, and attended by the 'leech' or the chirurgeon. But there were no very serious accidents, thanks to the steel panoply in which all were sheathed and the rockets, or buttons, on the lances. Sore bruises were freely distributed, and it was certainly a rough sport; but then all engaged in it were candidates for the real field of battle, and were taught to think lightly of simple knocks and contusions. He who feared such was accounted but a sorry, paltry wight indeed in those brave old days, and the battle was not always to the strong. Skill, quick wit, and activity often scored over brute force.

When Rupert de Mowbray rode forth he was hailed with greater acclamation than his predecessors, as the leader of his party. He made short work of his adversary, as Reginald Mortloe had done.

Sometimes neither candidate obtained any advantage in the first onset, both retaining their saddles and their

lances splintering. Then they rode back, were supplied with fresh lances, and once again advanced upon each other. If one did not go down this time, they again charged each other, for one or other had to win in order to enter the second heat. When the competitors were so evenly matched as this the interest of the onlookers reached fever-heat, and the final result called forth the wildest excitement.

To miss one's adversary altogether, to fail to strike him or his shield, was, of course, accounted highly discreditable, and such failure was invariably greeted with derisive laughter and ironical shouts.

At last the names of Geoffrey Halford and Cyril Branscombe were announced.

'Go in and win, lad!' said Mortloe, patting Geoffrey on the back. 'I must take your side, of course, against Cyril, as you belong to our party. I doubt me not, from what I already know of your prowess, you'll settle poor, conceited Cyril right away.'

Geoffrey sprang into the saddle. He was trembling with excitement as he took the lance from Mortloe.

'Come, come! Steady your nerves, lad! That is not the way to shape,' whispered the squire anxiously.

But the moment our hero was in position, with beaver down, his nervousness left him. 'Richard was himself again.' He took no heed of the sea of faces round, and settling himself firmly and easily in his saddle, waited with braced sinews for the word to go. His kind patron and master, the Black Prince, had lent him a plain and light suit of mail for the occasion, with a lance and shield. He rode his own sturdy palfrey.

'*Laissez aller!*' And driving his spurs deep, he tore forward at Cyril.

His lance was pointed full at his antagonist's shield; but just as it seemed about to strike this, he jerked it smartly up and aimed at Branscombe's helmet. This was a most difficult stroke to deliver, for, of course, the hand and eye had to be quick and sure to get home. A timely anticipation of the shield on Cyril's part and the lance must be knocked up, when Geoffrey would require all his address to withstand the impact of his opponent's lance upon his own shield or body. Of course, the movement

took place in the twinkling of an eye, and, to meet it, Cyril would have to act as quickly as thought itself.

He failed to do so, and small wonder! And Geoffrey's lance caught him full upon the casque with irresistible force. Backwards he was hurled, clean out of the saddle, his own lance glancing harmlessly off Geoffrey's shield, thrown forward at the same instant with rare adroitness, slightly to one side.

Over and over upon the green rolled the defeated one, and Geoffrey had the greatest difficulty in preventing his horse trampling on his fallen adversary. The address he showed called forth the admiration of all beholders.

'By my halidom!' cried Sir John Chandos, 'but your new page, your Grace, is a perfect marvel. 'Twas most adroitly done. The way he shifted his aim and hit his opponent's helm was worthy of one far older and more experienced in the use of the lance.'

'Ay! Sir John is right,' exclaimed the King, with face glowing with martial appreciation. 'He is a right skilful youth. How he managed his palfrey would become a belted knight.'

The young prince said nothing, but his bright eyes and the pleased look in his face showed how he approved these commendations of his page. Mortloe and several of the other competitors heaped praises upon our gratified young hero when he rode back to the pavilion, and had his helmet unlaced and removed.

The crowd presently showed signs of tiring of the long succession of jousts, when the young Prince of Wales was seen to rise from his throne and take his way towards the pavilion. At this the enthusiasm and expectancy of all were revived.

'The prince has risen! When's his turn to joust? And who is his opponent?'

'He's going to joust last of all. Humphrey Pradston, the Lord Chandos's squire, is to be his adversary. I' faith, it should be a tough meet.'

'By my troth, Geoffrey,' laughed the Black Prince, as he entered the pavilion and greeted our hero and his other partisans, 'thou dost surprise me more and more, and make me prouder and prouder of my choice of thee

for my page. Wherever didst learn to tilt like that? I never expected it of thee. I should not be surprised, though, after this an' thou art left in the final course.'

'I have had plenty of practice, your Grace, at the quintain and among my playmates of Lynn. Good Friar Nicholas taught me to ride and use the lance, as well as Latin, music, and other accomplishments. Thou hast doubtless heard of him?'

'Ay, sure; who hath not? 'Twas he who sailed in 1330 to the most northern islands in the world, on the first Polar expedition. He is a famous astronomer, too, an' my memory serve me. But I knew not he went in also for such unclerical arguments as the lance and buckler.'

'He did in his youth, I believe, your Grace, and certainly encouraged all of us who were his pupils to do so.'

Lancelot Arveley was unhorsed by Lancelot de Molines. And so the jousting continued merrily, until at length, amid the wildest cheering, the Black Prince rode into the lists, clad in his favourite coloured armour, and on a coal-black palfrey. With a tremendous crash, he and Pradston met in mid-arena. The lances were shivered to the gauntlets, but both combatants, though considerably shaken, kept their saddles, and by main force compelled their reeling, stumbling horses to recover their feet.

Fresh lances were handed them. Again they met, but this time the prince prevailed. Pradston's horse was sent rolling over, and its rider only saved himself from being pinned under it, and perhaps seriously injured, by drawing his feet out of the stirrups in time, and leaping clear.

This ended the first heat. Of the thirty-two squires and pages who had entered the lists, sixteen remained to continue the struggle for the prizes and honours of the conqueror. They were matched in the rotation they stood.

Once more Reginald Mortloe overthrew his opponent, and Rupert de Mowbray his. Geoffrey was pitted against a young squire named George Fenteville. Again our hero changed the direction of his aim at the last moment —this time from the helmet to the body of his opponent. Deceived by the feint at his head, Fenteville threw up

his shield to guard it, and Geoffrey's lance, passing below, struck him plumb-centre on the corslet, flinging him like a cannon-ball out of the saddle, while his horse galloped on, apparently hardly having felt the shock.

The prince was equally successful over his adversary —a feat that was loudly acclaimed.

'The prince will carry off the coronet, and name the Queen of Love, I'll wager thee any money, Tom Saddler,' cried Will Baker in the crowd.

'Nay, nay, my floury friend, I'll take no such wager,' replied the saddler. 'The prince is nigh sure to win. 'Twill rest atween him and young de Mowbray, I trow.'

VIII

HOW GEOFFREY HALFORD NAMED 'THE QUEEN OF LOVE AND BEAUTY'

THE competitors were now reduced in number to eight. Five of them belonged to the prince's party. Consequently he was matched against one of his own side for the third heat. Young De Molines was not one of the eight.

Our dashing squire, Reginald Mortloe, now met his match. He was unhorsed at the first onset by his opponent, a squire named Clement Rutherworth. Rupert de Mowbray was more fortunate. He once more sent his foe, horse and all, rolling upon the greensward.

Geoffrey Halford did likewise with his adversary, one Lionel Seddoun by name; and the Black Prince jerked his man clean out of the saddle.

The excitement of the spectators was at fever heat. But four competitors remained for the great prize and honour—Clement Rutherworth, Rupert de Mowbray, Geoffrey, and the prince.

'So, Geoffrey, it is thou and I now for it,' said the Black Prince, as they sat their panting steeds beside each other at the northern extremity of the lists, while Rupert de Mowbray and Rutherworth faced each other. 'Art going to roll thy liege-lord in the dust like the others?'

And he eyed his page's flushed face with a curious admixture of admiration and concern. Geoffrey laughed.

'I must e'en try and do so, my lord, for the sake of the credit and the prizes at stake.'

'Now, that's a right merry answer from a page to his lawful lord and master,' rejoined the prince. 'Well, well, prove thy mettle on my carcase an thou canst, Geoffrey. Thou hast my full permission, an thou needest it. Do thy best, lad. I would not have thee give me the

victory. Nay, by my halidom, not so! I shall be angry with thee an thou dost not ride against me every whit as furiously as thou hast against thine other antagonists.'

Rutherworth and Rupert met with a thunderous crash. Both kept their saddles, their lances shivering upon each other's shields. But the former's horse lost its footing, was unable to recover, and went down, and its rider had to throw himself off; so he was adjudged the vanquished.

And now Geoffrey had to ride over to the opposite end of the lists and face his young master. The multitude had no doubt as to the result of the joust.

'The page is a gallant youth, and hath borne himself right well through it up to this,' remarked Tom Saddler, voicing the opinions of all around him. 'But 'tis not likely he'll hold his own against the well-trained young prince.'

'*Laissez aller!*' thundered the marshals; and they flew at each other.

Geoffrey fully meant to do his best to win. Prince or none, he was not going to throw away his chance and hope of the golden circlet—the triumph of conqueror.

Both combatants, as they came together, feinted at each other's helmets; then suddenly lowered their lance-points and lunged for the breast-plate. But Geoffrey as promptly raised his again, while he received the prince's fairly upon his shield. He caught the prince on the gorget.

Edward of Wales' lance flew into pieces, and he was lifted from the saddle, albeit its high peaks before and behind locked him, as it were, to his mount, and dashed him half-senseless to the ground. Geoffrey reeled in his saddle like a drunken man, but kept it.

There was death-like silence for half a minute, while squires and pages ran from all sides to raise up the lifeless and motionless young scion of royalty. Men looked into each other's faces, dumbfounded and somewhat awe-stricken and scared by the unexpected result. King Edward was the first to acclaim the young victor.

'Bravo!' he shouted, rising from his seat. 'Right well met! Have ye lost your voices, my lords and gentlemen? Applaud such a splendid exploit. Why tarry ye? Is my son hurt in any way?' he asked.

He put the question to the heralds and pursuivants with a note of keen anxiety in his voice. For answer the young prince himself struggled to his feet, threw up his visor, revealing his face, even paler than its wont, and called out:

'Nay, father, I am all right, I was but dazed for a moment. All hail to the young champion who hath overthrown Edward, Prince of Wales!'

The noble scion of royalty went off with his anxious attendants, and the King, hiding his concern from the eyes of all, directed the last heat to be decided, whispering afterwards to Sir John Chandos to repair to the tent and bring tidings how the prince really had fared.

Feeling anything but comfortable over his last triumph, Geoffrey Halford rode back to his end of the lists and prepared for his tussle with Rupert de Mowbray.

He was allowed but little breathing time. The marshals gave the word to go. And he pricked up his palfrey again and rushed to the shock. Crash! Both lances broke, but both combatants remained upright.

Back they rode to be supplied with fresh lances. Once more they rushed at each other. Again the lances were shivered, but neither had the advantage.

A third time they met; and this time Geoffrey, who had puzzled his antagonist by moving his lance-point in a circle so that the latter knew not where to expect the assault, got his weapon home under the shield upon the breastplate. Rupert, on the other hand, had aimed at his helmet. He ducked his head, but nevertheless the lance grazed the peak, or *crenelle,* of his casque, and shored away the plumed crest. Geoffrey swayed, half stunned, but the great chair-like saddle helped him to recover and keep up, while his opponent was propelled like a stone from a catapult to earth, to lie there senseless, with the blood trickling forth through the bars of the visor.*

* The famous Constable of France, Bertrand du Guesclin, whom we introduce later, in 1338, when only eighteen, entered the lists at Rennes as an unknown squire, and overthrew in succession no less than seventeen knights, winning the prize of the tourney. The lance was Richard III's 'Crookback's' favourite weapon, 'because the one in which skill best supplied strength.'

Geoffrey Halford sat his palfrey, staring stupidly, completely dazed, at his vanquished adversary. His head was ringing like a bell inside its steel covering with the force of the blow it had received. Lights, blue, green, crimson, and yellow, danced before his bewildered eyes. He only partly comprehended the meaning of the thunderous plaudits that were rending the air. Men and youths, pursuivants, attendants, squires, and pages, rushed before his blurred vision and raised up Rupert. Hastily they cut away the laces of the unconscious youth's helmet, and raised his visor to give him air.

Sir Eustace de Mowbray had bounded from his seat on the daïs, when he saw his son did not rise, and now came hurrying up, pale with anxiety.

'He's not badly hurt, my lord. No need to be alarmed!' reassured several of those attending to Rupert. 'The blood hath but come from his mouth and nose through his heavy fall, and he is senseless—no more. He will soon recover.'

They bore Rupert towards his pavilion, his father walking concernedly by his side, while one of the marshals took hold of Geoffrey's palfrey and led it towards the royal gallery.

'Raise thy visor, brave youth, and show the populace thy face,' said the knight. 'Art thou hurt in any way?'

'No,' replied Geoffrey in a low voice, and he put up his left hand and threw back his visor.

He still felt dazed and sat his saddle like one in a dream. The array of excited faces was one blurred mass before his eyes. He saw not the ladies, as much carried away by enthusiasm as their attendant cavaliers, waving scarves and showering flowers upon him as he passed. The mad cheering of the common people seemed to beat like a great hammer upon his reeling brain. But he pulled himself together with an effort as he was halted before the King. Nevertheless, he rolled rather than sprang from the saddle, and almost fell as he sank on one knee upon the bottom step of the daïs in front of his sovereign.

'Master Geoffrey Halford, it giveth me the highest pleasure to confer upon thee the prizes of these jousts. Thou hast proved thyself the best of thirty-two lances,

mine own gallant son, the young Prince of Wales, not excepted. I will not conceal that I had hoped my son would carry off the prizes, but he, I doubt me not, will share in the admiration we all must have for this doughty young champion. His extreme youth, the fact that he is a page, and hath triumphed over squires several years his senior, redounds still more to his credit, and increases our royal delight in awarding him his hard-earned trophies.

'Bring forward the warhorse, the arms and armour that are his by right of his valour and prowess. And step up here on the daïs, my dashing young conqueror, while I crown thee with the golden wreath it is then thine honour and privilege to bestow on whichsoever fair lady present thou dost think fit, that she may rule it as the Queen of Love and Beauty at the banquet given in thine honour and the sports this afternoon.'

Geoffrey, feeling he was walking on air, mounted the steps of the daïs and knelt again before King Edward, who placed upon his helmet a chaplet of waxed red and white roses interspersed with gold hearts, pierced through with arrows, and ivy leaves. Blushing with pardonable pride and with his eyes shining like stars, the youth descended again to the lists, and the marshal whispered:

'Mount again now, my gallant lad! Yonder are thy prizes. Give me thy lance!'

Geoffrey handed him the lance, and sprang once more upon the back of his palfrey, while the crowd broke forth into renewed cheers. The recipient of all the honour glanced around, and saw a magnificent coal-black charger with just a white blaze, like a silver star, upon the forehead, accoutred with the richest footcloth and trappings, being led into the centre of the arena by two pages, one on either side. It was indeed a beautiful animal—black everywhere, as well as could be seen with the housings which reached almost to the ground, save on the forehead, as we have said. It stepped proudly, with its neck well arched, as if conscious of its own beauty, and yet the fling of its haunches showed it was capable of great speed as well as endurance.

Huge and ponderous withal, it was comparable to nothing so nearly as the great brewer's dray-horse of to-day; for a smaller animal could not bear the weight of the mail-clad knight, to say nothing of its own heavy panoply, in battle. Upon the great, high-peaked saddle was loaded a complete suit of the mail of the period that would fit a youth of about seventeen or eighteen; and, balancing each other on either side, were a black shield bearing no device, a long, cross-handled cut-and-thrust sword, and a lance and mace.

Geoffrey Halford might well be excused for gazing with avaricious delight upon such rare prizes. He was reminded he had yet another important duty to perform before the ceremony was complete by the voice of the marshal.

'Take thy lance, brave youth, and hand me the golden wreath from off thy helm that I may place it upon thy lance-point.' Still like one in a dream, Geoffrey obeyed, while the applause of the onlookers continued.

'And now,' continued the marshal, 'ride around the lists and choose the fair lady thou dost desire to reign as the Queen of Love and Beauty. Choose whomsoever thou dost please. It is thy right and privilege. When thou hast made thy selection, signify it by lowering thy lance-point, while retaining the saddle, and depositing the wreath at the lady's feet. Go now, thou needst no further posting as to thy conduct, methinks.'

Geoffrey remained stationary for nearly a minute after the marshal's whispered instructions, his face as red as fire from bashfulness, the consciousness that all eyes were riveted upon him and the natural embarrassment he felt over making his choice so publicly. Not that his mind was not already made up as to which lady he would favour with his homage. He would have given much to be allowed to lower his visor and hide his confusion. But such an act would not have been taken graciously by the curious and enthusiastic spectators. The fact, too, that every voice was now hushed did not by any means diminish his self-consciousness and diffidence.

He touched his horse lightly with his spurs, and

cantered out into the middle of the lists, near to where his prizes were, and then, making his mount describe a graceful bound round, faced the gaily-decorated galleries. Hastily, and in evident confusion—still red as a peony—he ran his eyes over the fair faces before him. Some of the ladies reddened, others simpered or tittered, while others dropped their eyes modestly—and hopefully withal, it must be admitted.

Geoffrey, for all his embarrassment, quickly singled out the sweet face he sought; and the moment he did so he rode straight towards it. In front of the balcony wherein sat the Ladies Beatrice and Sybil Penthony, beside their mother, he checked his horse, and, while the spirited animal pawed the earth, he lowered his lance and laid the golden wreath at the feet of Sybil. The lad felt he could have fled away the next instant, and bowed low upon his steed's neck to hide his face.

Sybil blushed rosy red, and drew back in maiden confusion, while the trumpets blared once more, and the throng rent the air with delighted shouts of—

'The Lady Sybil Penthony! Long life to her! Long life to the chosen Queen of Love and Beauty! The gallant youth could not have made a better choice.'

Gratified at the honour thus conferred upon one of his daughters, Sir Henry Penthony rose from his seat in the royal gallery and passed round to where his wife and daughters sat. He picked up the wreath and placed it upon Sybil's head, which the fond mother had hurriedly bared of its coverchief.

Again the trumpets sounded, and the crowd acclaimed the Queen of Love and Beauty, while King Edward rose with his courtiers to signify the morning's sport was at an end.

Geoffrey Halford cantered back to his pavilion, amid the thunderous applause of the admiring assemblage.

Reginald Mortloe and his brother-page, Lancelot Arveley, ran forward to be the first of his fellow-competitors to greet and congratulate him.

'Well done, Geoff! Well done, by my troth!' cried Mortloe, seizing his palfrey's rein on one side, while Arveley grasped it on the other. 'It takes the sting outen mine own defeat to know that one of us four

comrades hath carried off the honours of the joust—that thou hast kept it amongst the Prince's retinue.'

The warhorse and suit of mail Geoffrey had won as prizes in the contest had been taken away, the first to the castle stables, and the latter to the room he shared with Mortloe and his brother pages; there to await his later pleasure.

He now repaired with Lancelot Arveley, who could not do or say enough in admiration of his prowess, to a room in the castle, where he laved his weary limbs in a bath of crystal water.

Refreshed and re-invigorated, he assumed his court clothes once more, and, arm-in-arm, the two youths sought the banqueting-hall. They found it thronged with a gay assemblage of nobles, knights and ladies, squires and pages, all chatting and laughing together in little knots. The polished floor of age-darkened oak reflected dully the many-coloured raiment of that silken gathering, adding to its magnificence; and the tables upon the daïs and down the centre of the great apartment sparkled and glowed with richly-chased gold and silver goblets, stoups of rare wine, cut-glass dishes of fruit, and epergnes of flowers, spread upon dazzling white cloths.

As Geoffrey and Lancelot presented themselves at the portal a double row of men-at-arms drawn up before it clashed their 'brown bills' together and clanged the butt-ends on the stone flags, while a group of musicians, stationed to one side of the guard-room, struck cymbals loudly together and burst into a triumphal, war-like strain of melody.

'All hail to the young champion of the jousts!' thundered the men-at-arms, in a stentorian chorus; and the merry chattering throng fell back to either side of the hall and joined in the shout, the ladies waving their scarves, fans, and kerchiefs.

Geoffrey, abashed at this almost regal reception, blushed to the roots of his hair and hesitated to cross the threshold. But none less than the royal Edward in person came to his support. Advancing with a smile of pleasure upon his noble, commanding countenance, the King, checking the humble reverence Geoffrey would

have made, took the youth by the hand and led him up the glittering avenue to the daïs.

How he made that passage he could not tell; but, arrived at the platform, the monarch presented him to the Lady Sybil Penthony, who, covered with blushes and happy embarrassment, looked never lovelier than at that moment. She was enthroned under a silken canopy beside the King's own seat, holding her court, as the chosen Queen of Love and Beauty, amid her white-robed, flower-crowned maidens and picturesquely-attired little pages. Upon her winsome head was the golden wreath, the symbol of her temporary rule and sovereignty.

'Gracious madam!' spake the King, 'as thy fellow-sovereign, I present to thee thy most dutiful and gallant vassal, Master Geoffrey Halford, who hath proved himself the best of all thy most faithful subjects in the lists this morning.'

Sybil bowed with a most radiant little smile of greeting, and the King then, with a merry, approving laugh, handed our dizzy-brained hero to the chair of honour on the lady's right hand. This seemed to be a signal to the seneschal, or high steward, and the other upper servants to begin to marshal the guests to their places around the festive board, starting with the lowest rank.

'This is the second time within forty-eight hours I have to thank thee, kind young sir, for a knightly service,' said the Lady Sybil, with a curtsy that set all her sunny curls dancing about her sweet face, and offering her hand to her companion. 'Thou hast conferred a high honour upon me, and I am much beholden to thee.'

'Nay; 'tis thou who hast conferred the honour upon me in accepting the homage I am all so unworthy to offer thee.'

She laughed, shaking a tiny fore-finger reprovingly at him.

'I marvel much now how dour-looking Master Rupert yonder would have answered me. I trow he would not have humbled himself quite so much as thou.'

She cast a quick, sidelong glance in the direction of Rupert de Mowbray, who had been in converse with her

as the King and Geoffrey came up, and had moved aside with frowning brows and sullen face. Geoffrey felt a sharp, jealous pang stab his heart as he noted the object of her fleeting gaze; and he said, in a hurt, nettled tone:

'Nay, lady, you misjudge me an you deem I speak aught else than what is in my heart.'

She gave her head a coquettish toss that set all her glorious curls a-dancing again, while she trilled out a merry laugh, flashing a roguish, quizzing look at him.

By this time nearly all in that gay hall had been shown to their places at the tables, and the King now approached the daïs, arm-in-arm with Lady Penthony. His gallant son, for whose appearance the meal had been delayed, followed close behind, with the Lady Beatrice Penthony, and after them came the chief personages in the royal train, escorting the other ladies of the governor's household and the wives and daughters of the neighbouring barons and gentry. all of whom were at the castle to pay their devoirs to Royalty.

The Black Prince handed the Lady Beatrice to a chair immediately opposite Geoffrey Halford, and then, with a bow, took his leave of her and passed round to the other side of the table.

'Come, Rupert!' he cried, merrily, catching young de Mowbray *en route* by the arm. 'Take thy place, that next to our young champion of the lists, as is thy right.'

Rupert seated himself beside Geoffrey without a word in reply, the young prince took the next chair again, and Clement Rutherworth, with a proud and happy look, the adjoining vacant one. The four last competitors, therefore, for the prize and honours of the lists, were set together at the royal table.

The other knights and their ladies took their seats adown the two horns of the great crescent-shaped table, leaving a space immediately in front of the King and the Queen of Love and Beauty, so that all in the hall might see them freely.

A gong now clashed, the side doors opened, and the sewers bore in the smoking dishes.

Father Benedict, the chaplain, said grace; and then the clatter of knives and platters, as the guests fell to

upon the viands with avidity, rivalled the buzz of conversation.

As all the pages were permitted to sit down to the feast in honour of the occasion, the meats were brought to the tables ready carved by the attendants. Geoffrey, watching with zealous and anxious eye what the knights and nobles did, so as to guard against any flagrant breach of etiquette, all unused as he was to such scenes, carefully followed the example of those who had ladies beside them. When the dishes were brought round by the servants he helped the Lady Sybil to the choicest slices—impaled these upon his knife, and placed them on her plate.

'Oh, stop—stop! I have sufficient,' cried the fair girl, as he kept on heaping her plate. 'Thou must deem me a veritable glutton to give me so much. Prithee serve yourself.'

Geoffrey helped himself to one or two meagre slices, whereupon his merry neighbour said:

'Fie, fie, fair sir! Thou wishest to turn me to the blush, I plainly see, by giving me so much and taking so little thyself.'

'Nay, nay, madam. Thou forgettest I am to take part in yet more violent exercises than this morning's, and so I must keep my digestive organs unimpaired for them,' rejoined Geoffrey, entering fully into her humour with a delighted thrill in the region of the heart.

'Well, that is good, i'faith,' she retorted with an arch look, 'and I, too, have to take so prominent a part in the afternoon's sports! I suppose you think it will not matter if the Queen of the tourney looks heavy-eyed and torpid instead of all that is radiant and bewitching, as she presides upon her throne?'

'Nenny, that can never be! I trow well thou canst never look aught else than bewitching,' said Geoffrey, adoring her with his eyes.

'Come now, that is not badly turned,' laughed she, shaking her sunny curls all about her face and giving him an approving glance that set his pulse tingling, his heart and brain on fire. 'But thou art letting thy meat grow cold while looking at me and thinking out thy fulsome compliments.'

Her sister, the Lady Beatrice, was engaged in animated converse across the table beside them with the Black Prince and Rupert de Mowbray, who had thrown off his sulkiness and was now laughing and chatting so blithely that Geoffrey could not but wonder at the change. He would have had to be an ungracious boor indeed, though, not to have responded to the charming personality of the enchanting young creature opposite him, giving him such dazzling looks and smiles in turn with the Prince of Wales, as she talked to them. No one either could have sat beside the gay and light-hearted scion of royalty without becoming imbued with something of his sprightly spirits, catching their infection.

The Lady Sybil, for all her attention to her cavalier, watched her sister and Rupert out of the corners of her eyes, which twinkled roguishly the while, and also gave ear occasionally to the trio's prattle.

'Sybil,' suddenly exclaimed the Lady Beatrice, turning smilingly to her sister, 'I have agreed to give his Grace my silk scarf to wear as a lambrequin upon his helm, and Rupert one of my gloves to put upon his corselet over his heart in the lists this afternoon. They have both vowed to do or die in my service.'

'You must confer a similar favour upon your champion, Lady Sybil,' said the young prince, leaning across Rupert. 'It is but meet, you wot, that he, the conqueror of us all, should wear some token from the "lady fayre" of his choice.'

Sybil and Geoffrey both blushed, while Rupert knit his brows again and drew his lips tightly together. With a merry laugh to cover her confusion, Sybil took a blush-rose from her corsage and handed it to our over-joyed young hero with the reply:

'Certainly, my champion must not ride to the onset without some token from me, some symbol of my appreciation of the high honour he hath conferred upon me. Wear this, gentle page, upon the crest of thy casque in the *mêlée,* and may thou and it receive no scath, but come proudly and triumphantly through all.'

As if to increase Rupert's jealous fury, Sybil pinned the rose upon Geoffrey's breast, taking it from him with

another little laugh on seeing his clumsy efforts to fasten it in place.

The meal was now ended, and the King rose as the signal for the company to disperse and prepare for the afternoon's sports. There were to be greater festivities at and after the supper, which was to follow the *mêlée,* and so the wine had been drunk without any toasts or healths and speeches, as was usual.

'Thou hast my sincere good wishes, Master Halford, in the coming affray,' said Sybil, as they quitted the table, she to proceed with her train of maidens and pages to occupy her throne at the lists, he to hurry away to the pavilion he shared with his fellow-partisans and array himself once more in steel harness. 'Acquit thyself as well as thou didst this morning, and thy chosen Queen will be pleasured much.'

With a curtsy she swept off with her attendant maidens; and Geoffrey, his brain and heart on fire, turned swiftly and hastened after the prince and the other gentlemen.

IX

HOW GEOFFREY DID NOT CARRY OFF THE HONOURS OF THE TOURNEY

The common herd of spectators of the jousting had not left the castle grounds, or been wholly forgotten in the festivity of their betters. Hogsheads of ale had been rolled out of the cellars and set abroach, to be emptied by them at pleasure; and whole oxen and sheep, roasted before the capacious fireplaces in Sir Henry Penthony's kitchen day and night, for nearly a week beforehand, were brought forth and carved for all comers by a crowd of servants.

Well-clad and pursy burghers and mercers, and their wives and daughters, from Lynn and Norwich, did not disdain to partake of this lavish hospitality, and picnicked upon the grassy slopes and summit of the great earth-works around, side by side with the sturdy, comfortable yeoman and the green-liveried forester.

'Chapmen,' or pedlars, with peacock feathers in their hats as a symbol of their trade, went about among the laughing, holiday-making groups with their boxes of wares slung in front of them, extolling the virtues of what they sold in sing-song, doggerel chants. Jongleurs, gleemen, and gleemaidens, in tawdry finery, danced and sang, and played on the viol, the pipes, and the cittern, to the huge appreciation, and no little guerdon, of their audience.

Suddenly a loud flourish of trumpets hushed the laughing, shouting, and singing, and the men-at-arms and archers of the castle-guard, lounging around and participating in the revelry, resumed their professional rôles, and bawling 'Clear the lists! clear the lists!' began hustling and driving the throng out of these, once

more restoring order out of chaos. Before the mail-clad marshals, with their heralds and pursuivants, reappeared the central space was cleared, the fragments of the al-fresco feasting collected and removed by the lower order of attendants, and the multitude drawn up again in solid array without the barriers.

Then the trumpets blared a second time with a grander flourish, and the Black Prince issued from the castle portals arm-in-arm with Rupert de Mowbray. Behind them marched the other squires and pages who were to take part in the *mêlée,* or tournament, the partisans walking like their leaders side by side. Our champion of the jousts, Geoffrey Halford, strode beside Clement Rutherworth, with the blush-rose the Lady Sybil Penthony had pinned upon the breast of his doublet still in place; the gallant young prince wore the blue silk scarf the Lady Beatrice had bestowed upon him over his left shoulder, while Rupert had the same fair damosel's glove affixed to the front of his cap.

Enthusiastic shouts greeted them, and the partisans separated with hand-shakes and courtly bows, and took their opposite ways to their pavilions. In front of the prince's stood the noble coal-black charger Geoffrey had won in the jousting, but the suit of mail, the lance, sword, and shield were no longer on its back. Geoffrey went up to the splendid animal, which was champing its bit, and pawing the earth restively in the grasp of two stalwart men-at-arms, and patted its glossy, arched neck. It whinnied with pleasure, as if it already knew him to be its master.

Once more the trumpets sounded, to announce the coming of the King and his retinue; and then a joyous burst of music from cittoles, rebecs, timbrels, and other instruments heralded the advent of the Queen of Love and Beauty, the fair and radiantly happy Lady Sybil, attended by her maidens and pages.

King Edward rose and descended from the daïs to meet her. Amid deafening plaudits he handed her up the steps, and did not resume his seat until she was on her throne.

Now the heralds advanced, and, blowing their trumpets, obtained silence, and proclaimed in loud voices

the laws of the tourney. The combatants were first to ride to the shock with shield and blunted lance, then take to the sword and fight hand-to-hand in general engagement, until one side was completely vanquished. If unhorsed, a youth might continue the struggle with any of the opposite party in the same plight. A horseman, though, was not to assail a footman, or vice-versâ. There was to be no thrusting with the swords, which were blunted as a precautionary measure, only striking; and whosoever fell, lost his sword, or had it broken, was to be accounted defeated by his adversary.

A chaplet of magnificent pearls was to be awarded to the combatant who was considered by the King to have distinguished himself above all others, and he would be publicly crowned with it by the Queen of Love and Beauty.

The heralds retired; and the partisans filed from their respective pavilions arrayed in full armour for the fray. In dead silence their horses were brought round to them from the rear of the marquees.

Geoffrey Halford no longer wore the armour lent him by the prince for the jousts, but the magnificent suit he had won. The populace at once recognized it and the black shield — without any escutcheon, of course — and shouted to him:

'The best of good wishes, Master Halford! Hurrah for the champion of the jousts! Carry off the chaplet of pearls as well!'

He wore the Lady Sybil's blush-rose entwined in the wreath on the top of his casque as a crest. The Black Prince had the Lady Beatrice's blue silk scarf hung as a lambrequin, or curtain, to protect from the rays of the sun, upon his helm; while Rupert de Mowbray had the same lady's glove upon the left breast of his corselet.

Geoffrey was to ride his little palfrey, Brownie, as he called her, not his great black war-horse, as this would have given him a decided advantage over his fellow-combatants, who were all mounted upon light hacks. It had been deemed advisable for safety's sake, on account of the extreme youth of those concerned, to prohibit the employment of destriers.

The competitors again numbered thirty-two—sixteen a-side—the places of those who had been incapacitated in the jousting being taken by fresh candidates.

The Black Prince and Rupert de Mowbray, as the leaders, were opposed to each other in the centre of the foremost rank of their party. Geoffrey Halford was on the right hand of his royal master, and pitted against Clement Rutherworth, while Reginald Mortloe, on the prince's other hand, faced one of Geoffrey's former antagonists, Lionel Seddoun. All those who had succumbed in the first course of the jousts were put in the second line with the fresh men.

'All ready? All ready? *Laissez aller!*'

Down went the lances into the rests, and forward with busy spurs thundered the front ranks of either party, to meet with a deafening crash in mid-arena, while the rear ranks rode after at a slower pace to follow up the success or make good the defeat of their comrades.

Nine of the competitors were unhorsed, five on the prince's side, four on Rupert de Mowbray's. The two leaders had parted on equal terms, splintering their lances on each other's shields, and being borne back by the concussion almost to their horses' cruppers. They galloped on past each other, and crashed into the rear ranks; but ere they did so both recovered, had thrown away their broken lances, and drawn their swords. With their shields they were each successful in warding off the lance-thrusts of the new antagonists, whom they felled the next instant by a trenchant stroke of their swords.

Geoffrey Halford had hurled Rutherworth clean out of the saddle, but his own sturdy little palfrey was borne back upon its haunches, and almost fell. He held it up, dropped his lance, which, however, was unbroken, on account of its unwieldiness at close quarters, and took also to his truncheon-like sword. He had barely unsheathed this and controlled the trembling Brownie, when Cyril Branscombe rushed full tilt at him with levelled lance, evidently determined to wipe out the ignominious overthrow of the joust.

Causing his palfrey to describe a caraçole, Geoffrey

evaded the onslaught, and, as Cyril was carried past him by the impetus of the charge, delivered a back-stroke with his sword, into which he put the full strength of his arm. It caught Cyril on the nape of the neck, and beat that youth headforemost out of the saddle.

Reginald Mortloe and his antagonist had unhorsed one another, and were dancing round each other on foot, hammering away with their swords in the struggle for mastery.

All was now wild confusion and tumult. Rupert de Mowbray, with one supporter, was fighting in the thick of the prince's second rank, keeping it completely engaged. He parried thrust after thrust of his out-numbering foes' lances with sword and shield alternately, and with rapidly-whirling, fast-plying arm was bearing youth after youth, in turn, from the saddle.

The prince was also contending alone with a circle of antagonists, and likewise holding his own by his activity, splendid horsemanship, and consummate sword-play. His side shouted as a war-cry: 'The label! The label!' signifying the mark of cadency on his shield, a fillet or band with three pendant points, which marked him as the eldest son, during his father's life-time. The opposite party answered with cries of 'De Mowbray! De Mowbray!'

Geoffrey, seeing his royal master so hard pressed, galloped to his succour, and engaged two adversaries at once. One was still armed with the cumbrous lance, the other with a sword. Goffrey warded off the thrust of the lance with his shield, and dashed at the swordsman. He aimed a terrific blow at the youth's head; but the latter received it on his shield. So prodigious, however, was the force with which Geoffrey dealt the stroke that he beat down the shield upon the other's head, and the youth swayed over and fell out of the saddle. Geoffrey wheeled to meet the lancer. Again he parried the thrust, and, dashing in, truncheoned him, too, senseless out of the saddle.

Together then the prince and Geoffrey drove the remnant of their antagonists like sheep before them to the wall of the castle, where, huddled together, they were accounted vanquished. Back the victors rode

proudly, to find that matters had gone hard indeed with the others of their party, who had been unhorsed by the prowess of Rupert de Mowbray's single arm. He, too, however, was no longer mounted, his horse having stumbled and thrown him in the act of vanquishing the last of his mounted antagonists. With two others of his side, he was continuing the fight on foot with Reginald Mortloe, little Lancelot Arveley, and two more of their partisans.

'We must dismount and join in also afoot, Geoffrey,' bawled the prince through the bars of his visor.

The sun was setting, and throwing the great shadow of the castle keep across the lists and the galleries. Geoffrey and his master sprang from their reeling, perspiring steeds, and advanced to the support of their partisans. But they came too late. Reginald Mortloe went down before Rupert's all-conquering truncheon, and a comrade was beaten across him the next second, while the other two, locked in the arms of their antagonists, rolled over in fierce rough and tumble upon the ground, thus conquering and being conquered at the same time. Rupert de Mowbray alone survived of his party, and had now to face the joint attack of the prince and Geoffrey. The gallant Black Prince threw up his visor.

'I withdraw voluntarily from the contest,' he shouted at the top of his voice, sheathing his sword. 'Do thou, Geoffrey, contest for the prize of valour with the brave de Mowbray.'

A shout of admiration at his generosity swelled up from the enthusiastic multitude; and then once more every voice was hushed as Geoffrey and Rupert confronted each other, sword in hand, and with helmets barred.

One moment's pause and they flew at each other while the noble young prince stood aside. Clang! clang! clang! their swords rang on each other's shields and ironclad bodies. Round and round those steel truncheons circled, and swept, and flashed in the rays of the setting sun. But neither could gain the slightest advantage over the other; and presently both were fain to fall apart for a breathing spell.

'Enough!' shouted the voice of King Edward, as

he threw down his baton, as a signal for the marshals to stop the unavailing duel. 'Both youths have sufficiently proved their valour and skill, and we determine the chief honour of the tourney in favour of the gallant young Rupert de Mowbray, who hath so ably sustained the adverse fortunes of his side.'

Geoffrey and Rupert sheathed their swords in obedience to the royal mandate; and the marshals of the lists sprang from their saddles and, raising their visors, advanced towards the combatants to lead the champion preferred to the foot of the King's throne.

'Master Mowbray,' said King Edward, 'thou hast proved thyself truly worthy of the high grade of knighthood to which thou dost aspire. We are sure when we award thee the honours of this tournament—confer on thee the privilege of claiming and receiving the Chaplet of Valour at the fair hands of the chosen Queen of Love and Beauty, we are fulfilling the desire of all here present. Go then, gallant squire, and receive the meed of thy prowess from her we all unite in doing dutiful obeisance to by right of her unquestionable prerogative.'

The trumpets sounded, the drums rolled, and the knights, squires, and common people cheered vociferously, while the ladies waved their kerchiefs and veils as the marshals led the youthful champion to the Lady Sybil's throne.

Geoffrey Halford could not help feeling a sharp pang of jealousy, as he stood beside the Prince of Wales and his fellow-partisans at the door of their pavilion, and saw his own chosen Queen of Love and Beauty rise from her seat of honour, step forward with the chaplet in her hands, and place it upon the bared head of Rupert, who knelt before her. What Sybil said he could not hear; she spoke in too low a voice. Rupert kissed her hand, which she extended to him, and then once more the trumpets blared, the drums beat, and the crowd cheered and began to break up.

X

HOW GEOFFREY HALFORD SANG TO A MIXED COMPANY

'GEOFFREY,' said the Black Prince, when the page presented himself at cock-crow next day to dress his lord, 'we leave here to-morrow to march straight to Southampton, where all our forces are at present gathering, thence to ship to France. I will excuse thee, therefore, the rest of to-day that thou mayst bid good-bye to thy father and friends in Lynn. Be back, though, in time for rere-supper, for we will probably be starting at day-break.'

'Thank thee for thy gracious leave. O my prince, I would fain bid adieu to my father and acquaintances.'

Accordingly, immediately after breaking his fast with the other pages and the squires, Geoffrey Halford mounted his little palfrey, Brownie, and rode out under the grey old Norman gatehouse, across the stone bridge, and through the village along the road to Lynn. The fresh morning air, sweet with the fragrant breath of the uplands, the mellow sunshine, and the wide, free, smiling country-side, filled his young veins with the joy of living, and he was soon alternately whistling and humming snatches of song to the merry music of his pony's hoofs.

He was dressed in his new courtly raiment, with the prince's arms embroidered upon the breast and sleeves, and the labourers he met proceeding to their work in the fields and the country wenches bringing home the milk halted and doffed caps or curtsied respectfully to him as they passed. Geoffrey was not proof enough against boyish vanity not to feel extremely gratified by these marks of homage, and he galloped along with spirits growing every moment lighter, and immeasurably proud of himself.

His conceit was ministered to still more when he had covered the four miles to his destination, and was prancing through the well-known streets of the ancient town. Wealthy, purse-proud burghers and mercers, who were wont to pass him by without even a glance, stopped and gazed after him, and the 'prentices, some of whom he remembered having bouts at fisticuffs with only a few months back, ran out from behind their masters' stalls to stare with all their eyes, as the saying goes, and envy him with his fine clothes and changed fortunes. For there was not a living soul in Lynn who had not heard of his extraordinary good luck; it was the talk of the place.

Old Roger Halford was standing at the door of his hostelry. He was sunning himself and letting the fresh morning breeze blow away the cobwebs from his brain, somewhat fuddled after the previous night's potations of his own ale with his customers and neighbours, who had dropped in to congratulate him upon his son's achievements in the joust and tourney, and to toast the lad's health with him in many a flowing bumper. He looked up at the clatter of Brownie's hoofs upon the cobblestones of the market-place, to utter a wild whoop of delight as he recognized the ridden first and then the rider.

'Dame Joan—Dame Joan!' he yelled. 'Come out—come out, quick! Here be our brave boy! Here be Geoffrey come back!'

He rushed across, as the youth threw himself from the saddle, and hugged the laughing happy lad like the great bear he was.

'My brave lad—my gallant lad! Oh, it does my eyes good to look upon thee in such brave finery. Let me hold thee at arm's length and take in every point of thee!

'I have heard—the whole town has—of thy great doings in the tourney, how thou didst unhorse all thy fellow-competitors, even the gracious and noble young Prince of Wales himself, and carry off the prize and name the Queen of Love and Beauty. I cannot say how proud I am of thee, but we all drank deep to thee last night, wherefore my head is none of the clearest or my tongue of the readiest this morning. But come

in—come in! Dame Joan will be as eager to hold thee as I was. Ah, here's Ostler Tom, to greet thee. I warrant, Tom, thou didst stir thyself more briskly than thy wont when thou didst hear my shout just now.'

The shaggy-headed fellow grinned, and extended his huge paw with eyes dancing with delight.

'Thou'll not refuse to shake my hand. I wot well, good Master Geoffrey. Thou'll not be too proud after what thou hast done, to recognize thy father's faithful serving-man.'

'Faithful, quotha?' cried Roger with feigned scorn. 'When wert thou ever faithful to aught else than thy cup and platter, Tom Ostler?'

'Nay, Tom, it would but ill become me to forget him who first taught me how to ride and keep my saddle,' answered Geoffrey, seizing the honest fellow's hand, and wringing it cordially.

'The lazy, good-for-nothing varlet,' growled old Roger, keeping up his pretence at ill-humour, 'he didn't forget to brag last night 'twas from him you had your first lessons in horsemanship, and I had to stop his mouth with more cups of good brown ale than my fuddled brain can well now remember.'

And now Dame Joan, the inn-keeper's housekeeper ever since his wife's death, when Geoffrey was a little toddler of two, appeared in the pretty, flowering porch, with her wrinkled, yellow old face abeam with joyous anticipation.

'Where is my boy? Where is my brave lad?' she piped in her cracked tones. 'Ah, there he be. Come to my heart, my child! Let me clip and buss thee to my old heart's content.'

And, running up, she threw her arms around Geoffrey's neck, and kissed him on the mouth and both cheeks, while she strained him to her bosom, and the tears streamed from her eyes for very delight.

They entered the inn, where was assembled a goodly, if mixed, company, who had slept the night there, and been watching the scene without through the windows. There were gleemen and jongleurs and gleewomen, two or three pedlars, and a sprinkling of yeomen, all of whom had been to the tournament at Castle Rising,

and had stopped at the inn to partake of the good cheer dispensed without charge or stint on the previous evening in honour of his son's great triumph by the proud and overjoyed host. These all rose at Geoffrey as he was ushered in, the men pressing forward, begging for a handshake, and the women equally clamorous to buss him.

His father and Dame Joan presently rescued him from their attentions and dragged him off to their private portion of the house to have him to themselves for a while. The good old housekeeper wanted to know all about the Lady Sybil Penthony, his chosen Queen of Love and Beauty. Was she very pretty? Did he then think her the prettiest girl present? And, of course, how was she dressed? Was she sweet and gentle of speech to him at the banquet? with a great many more questions that Geoffrey found it very difficult to answer.

They asked him about the Black Prince, and, in a word, how he had got on in the castle. And then, with a strange diffidence, and yet eager anxiety, the innkeeper inquired if he had seen the Lady Crosbie, and given her the letter.

'Yea to both your queries, dad, but I was greatly surprised at her behaviour at sight of me, before I had time to give her the letter.'

'What did she do? What did she say?' asked the old man, his rubicund face losing something of its hue, and speaking in quick, excited, hoarse tones.

'She gripped me so tightly by the arm, she hurt me, and stared at me as if she saw a ghost, and demanded my name, muttering something about my features being the same and that there was fate in it. I am quite at a loss to understand her meaning. Canst thou give me the rede of it, father?'

'I—I! Why shouldst thou think I could explain her conduct, Geoffrey?' stammered his father, in confusion or consternation, or both. 'But—but what said she when she read the letter?'

'Naught. She had not opportunity just then, for the queen dowager came out of her room while she was reading it and came up to us.'

'What! You saw the Dark Lady?' almost screamed Dame Joan, throwing up her hands in pious horror and clasping them upon her bosom, while she drew her breath in sharply.

'Not only saw but spoke to her, good dame,' replied Geoffrey with a smile at her superstitious dread.

'Spoke with her!' echoed both his listeners in a breath.

'Even so,' and the youth gave a brief account of what had passed between him and the dowager queen, while they listened awestruck.

'Thou must be careful, Geoffrey,' said Dame Joan, shaking her grey head solemnly and looking rather alarmed. 'The ways of a palace are new and strange to thee, and thou must beware pitfalls and snares to thy undoing at every turn. Take a fond old woman's advice, and if thou wouldst keep in the good graces of all thou art now thrown against, avoid offending in the smallest particular.'

'I did give him similar advice ere he went,' said his father, 'and for that very reason gave him the letter commending him to the kind patronage of the Lady Alicia. But did she—the Lady Alicia I mean, of course—not seek thee out afterwards, Geoffrey, and say aught to thee?'

'No, father, she did not, and I marvelled thereat, I must admit, for she had ample opportunity of so doing, had she wished. She could not very well have forgotten the letter; she sat almost opposite me at the banquet.'

His father made no reply, and at that moment the ostler put his head in at the door.

'The company want thee, master. They are clamouring for free drinks to celebrate Master Geoffrey's return.'

'They must have them. I am coming. Thou wilt be stopping to none-meat at least, Geoffrey? Thou wilt not be returning to Castle Rising yet awhile, I trow?'

'Nay, father. His sweet Grace has given me the day to bid ye all good-bye, for we start for the French wars with the morrow's sun, but I must see good Friar Nicholas and bid him a dutiful farewell this afternoon.'

'Thou art going to the French wars? Haro and alas! my bonny lad, I may never lay my old eyes upon thee again, then,' cried Dame Joan, throwing up her hands and then throwing them down heavily upon her lap, as she burst into tears of distress.

'Nenny, nenny, good dame!' and the lad threw his arms around the old creature's neck and kissed her fondly. 'It is not every one who goes to war who is killed, remember. I will return as safe and sound as I leave thee, please God, and mayhap—who knows?—a belted knight and covered with glory.'

Roger Halford had followed Tom Ostler from the room; and, drying her tears and calling up a smile, the dame now led the youth off to her apartment to give him a certain specific for all bodily ills and ailments, a most wonderful simple in the case of wounds and bruises, which she had received when a girl from the 'Wise Woman of Wymondham,' and for the good merits of which she could honestly vouch by her own experience since. The pair were sitting in the large kitchen, the good dame giving the youth all manner of motherly advice as to how he should rule his conduct in the camp and at Court, when Roger reappeared.

'Geoffrey, lad, the company are most clamorous for thee to show thyself once more amongst them, if only to crack one cup or sing them a song,' said the old man. 'Wilt thou favour them? There are several present who have heard thee play on the cittern, and they beg for a lilt from thee. I wot well 'tis scarce meet that a page of his royal Grace, the Prince of Wales, shouldst demean himself to entertain a crowd of taproom bibbers, but I will not answer for the safety of my tankards and trestles, an I go back with word thou art now too high and mighty to sit in their company.'

'Nay, then, father, you must not disappoint them; and it shall never be said that I was too proud to remember old friends and the customers I once served,' answered Geoffrey, springing up from his settle. And by the same token, dad, thou hast reminded me of my cittern; I must take it with me to France. It may help beguile many an evening in camp. I will fetch it.'

He ran up to the little chamber that he called his own, and rejoined his father at the door of the common room, with the cittern under his arm. The rude laughter and clatter of tongues ceased as they entered, and then the whole company set up a loud cheer.

'A carouse! A carouse! And honour to the dashing young champion of the jousts who is not too proud, ye see, gossips, to sit and drink with us!' roared one great fellow in the Lincoln green livery of a verderer or forester.

'The lad will crush one cup with ye, gentles, and he will twang ye a lilt upon his cittern, but then ye must hold him excused, for he hath not overmuch time to linger here and must say good-bye to all his friends in Lynn. He starteth for the French wars with the royal train with the morrow's sun,' said the inn-keeper, commanding silence. 'I will take your orders, gossips, while he sings to ye. Now name your cups!'

While the company were one and all eagerly giving their orders, Geoffrey seated himself upon a bench near the door and tuned up his instrument. Then twanging a few chords as a prelude and to obtain attention, he broke into song. He had a very fair baritone voice, which would probably improve with his years, and this was the burden of his lilt:

THE ENGLISH ARCHER

Come, gather ye round, and I'll sing you the fame
Of him who hath made Old England's name,
The bowman, the yeoman,
The English archer stout,
Who with his shaft, in peace or war,
Ne'er fails to hit the clout.

REFRAIN

Ne'er fails to hit the clout, my lads,
Ne'er fails to hit the clout;
Who with his shaft, in peace or war,
Ne'er fails to hit the clout.

The knight may boast his lance and shield.
He hath proved his mettle on many a field.
But the bowman, the yeoman,
The English archer true,
Can wing an arrow through his shield or casque
With the famed long-bow of yew.
With the famed long-bow of yew, my lads, &c.

Oh, the chivalry of kings hath oft recoiled,
And warriors of name, too, have been foiled,
Through the bowman, the yeoman,
The English archer brave,
Whose pelting hail of feathered shafts
Hath found them a soldier's grave.
Hath found them a soldier's grave, my lads, &c.

The bow must be full six feet long,
The shaft, a clothyard, trim and strong,
And the bowman a yeoman,
An English archer, friends,
To speed the good shafts fast and sure,
The shafts with the grey goose ends.
The shafts with grey goose ends, my lads, &c.

Then here's the health of him I praise!
And who will refuse his cup to raise?
To the bowman! the yeoman!
The English archer bold!
May he carry all before him still—
His own for ever hold!
His own for ever hold, my lads, &c.

XI

DICKON O' THE FENS

'A RIGHT good lilt, and well sung, too!' roared a short but burly man in the garb of a farmer or yeoman, thumping with a thick cudgel or small quarter-staff, shod with iron at either end, upon the wooden bench he bestrode.

The other male guests of the inn likewise uttered appreciative shouts and beat with the hafts of their knives upon the trestle-tables, while the women clapped their hands.

'A right good lilt, I say,' continued the yeoman, 'but 'tis new to mine ear, and methought I knew every ballad yet trolled by gleeman in praise of our grand old English archery. Where picked ye that up, lad? I fain would learn it, an' I might.'

'No wonder thou hast not heard it before, yeoman,' observed old Roger Halford, anticipating Geoffrey's rejoinder. 'The lad composed it himself, words and music.'

'Composed it himself, quotha? Hearken to that now! Thou art well fitted then, Master Geoffrey, for thy exalted rank of squire to the Prince of Wales, but thou wilt have to sing very different tunes, I ween, to retain the favour of thy master and his minions.'

'What meanest thou by that, stranger?' demanded one of the foresters or verderers, a big, powerful, handsome man, with a flowing, brown beard, eyeing the speaker sharply and somewhat resentfully.

'I mean that a troubadour who sings of the prowess of homely English archers instead of the doings of mail-clad knights and barons, who tells in his lays how "the chivalry of kings," and "warriors of name," have recoiled before the clothyard shaft of the despised common man, will not find favour among the lords and rulers of this happy England of ours,' was the reply.

made with a defiant thrust forward of the speaker's chin and slight contraction of his eyebrows.

These bold words, almost amounting to treason at that period, when the peasants were practically the slaves of those on whose lands they dwelt, drew all eyes upon their utterer.

He was short and burly, as we have said, and dressed in good Norwich cloth, showing that he occupied a fairly comfortable position in life. His face could not by any means be called a handsome one, but the features were strongly marked, resolute, and fearless-looking, and withal there was stamped upon them the expression of one accustomed to command. The brows, thick and coal-black, met across the nose, which was broken and bent aside at the bridge, evidently from a severe blow, and the rather thick lips were curled in a perpetual sneer. He was clean shaven and deeply tanned from exposure, undoubtedly to all sorts of weather, but there was nothing brutish or coarse about the revealed lower jaw, only determination and courage. The eyes, of a deep blue, were large and lustrous, redeeming the visage. Even with the look of contemptuous defiance now flashing from them, the proverbial shrewd observer might have read latent good humour and generosity of soul in them.

'Thou speakest boldly, yeoman. One would think thou wert a disloyal and masterless man from thy talk,' said the forester, returning his fierce gaze with one equally as fierce.

'I speak as I think fit,' retorted the unknown. 'And who here can gainsay my words? We of the common herd, as these gently-born knights and ladies term us, are despised and treated no better than serfs and villeins by those whose battles we win for them. Bannockburn field might have told another tale had your boasted mail-clad chivalry stood by the archers; and to what was the victory of Halidon Hill or that of Sluys due, but the straight shooting of the English bowmen? Yet your lords and barons take all the credit.'

There was a low murmur of approval from the other yeomen and the women present.

'Your King, Edward III, could not even pay us

yeomen the compliment of archery among the sports of Rising. No, only those of the lists could take place. We bowmen are not to be considered, save when our heaven-born lords and masters need our services on the field of battle,' went on the yeoman heatedly. 'But the day is not far distant, my friends, when we of the common order will humble the crests of these proud tyrants and assert our rights as freeborn Englishmen. The English long-bow will yet make the despots at home quail the same as hath the foreign foe.'

The verderer sprang to his feet, and threw up his clenched fist.

'Ha! I know thee now, thou vile treason-monger! Thy face puzzled me ever since I clapped eyes upon it, but I recognize it now. Seize him, gossips! He is Dickon o' the Fens, the prince of robber-varlets!'

But the denounced was on his feet and bounding for the open door before another person in the company could make a move, even if he or she had felt so inclined. The forester sprang in the outlaw's way, and managed to grasp the arm that swung the iron-shod staff. Without attempting to wrench himself free, the desperado drew back his left fist, clenched, and drove it with sickening force into his would-be captor's face.

Big as the verderer was—fully a head taller than his assailant and broad in proportion — he went back heavily over the little trestle-table from which he had risen, upsetting it with the tankard and trencher, and the settle behind it. He lay stunned and with the blood gushing from his nose amid the wreckage, while his antagonist disappeared in a flash through the door.

All was immediately horror and confusion in the inn; but none of its inmates followed the fugitive. The injured man was lifted, placed upon a bench, and speedily brought round; when seeing he was not seriously hurt, Geoffrey took advantage of this diversion to slip from the room. He stayed to none-meat, or dinner, and then, taking a tender farewell of his father and Dame Joan, went the round of his old friends. It was well into the evening before he could get away from them all and proceed to the Franciscan or Grey Friars' Priory. Of this there only remains to-day a hexagonal lantern tower,

ninety feet high, sustained by an open brick arch. The building was of red brick and stone in the Perpendicular style. Dismounting, Geoffrey rang the bell, when the grille, or wicket, in the door was immediately opened, and the bluff features of a lay-Brother looked out at him. A smile of recognition at once crossed the porter's face, and he threw wide the door.

'Brother Nicholas is in his cell and thou dost seek him, fair son,' he said.

'It is Brother Nicholas I would see, good Brother Bernard, thank thee,' replied the youth, and springing lightly up the winding stone stairs ascending almost to the top of the turret, he knocked upon an oaken door deep sunk in the wall.

It was opened promptly by a tall, thin man, in a brown habit.

'Ah, Geoffrey, 'tis thou. I was expecting thee. I knew thou wouldst not go away without coming to bid good-bye to thine old tutor. Come in! Come in! I was in the midst of a most abstruse theory—I—I mean hypothesis, regarding the relation of the earth to the sun.'

He ushered the lad into the cold, bare room of naked stone. There was a truckle-bed pushed into one corner, and a table, consisting of a couple of planks laid on trestles, occupied the centre of the flagged floor, and was littered with various uncouth-looking instruments of brass, globes, and compasses, amid which lay a great iron-clasped manuscript tome lying open, an inkhorn and quills, and several rolls of parchment. In front of the book was a rude settle; and a prie-dieu of heavily-carved oak stood before a large ivory cross hanging on the wall. At the foot of the cross was a painting on vellum of a lamb, while above it was another picture representing a pelican tearing at its breast with its beak and gouts of blood dropping down into the mouths of three young ones. This was what was known as the pelican 'in her piety.' The mythical belief existed in the Middle Ages that this bird fed its young with its own blood as in the manner depicted, and so was looked upon as a type of the Redeemer and made the symbol of charity.

On the wall facing the window was an ivory and enamelled triptych or carving, with two hanging doors or leaves, by which it could be closed. The central design represented the Crucifixion, those on the leaves the Scourging at the Pillar and the Crowning with Thorns.

Friar Nicholas was a man of about fifty years of age. His face was noble and gentle in expression, the mouth being as sweet as any woman's, though the firm chin redeemed it from the supposition of effeminacy. His eyes were large, bright, and keen, though they would assume a dreamy, absorbed expression, as if they saw far away, when he was discoursing upon his favourite pursuits of studying the heavenly bodies and music. The hair clustering round his temples was wavy, and just turning to grey.

He was looked upon by his brother clerics, and all who knew him, as a man on whom the cloak of Roger Bacon, 'the Admirable Doctor,' had descended, one, indeed, who was likely to surpass that learned friar in the paths of science. Sixteen years before, ere he had turned to the cloister, he had sailed from Lynn on the first Polar expedition, and had made 'the most Northern Islands in the world,' so we are informed by a chronicler of the time.

'So, Geoffrey, boy, thou hast achieved rare distinction since I saw thee last,' he said, merrily, patting the lad on the shoulder. 'I have heard all about it—how thou didst save the King's train from ambush by traitors, how the young Prince of Wales took a fancy to thee, and made thee his page, as well as how thou didst overthrow all competitors in the jousts, and carry off the prize. Well done! I am proud—right proud of thee.'

'I have to thank thee, Father, for my skill with the lance and shield,' replied Geoffrey.

'Thou hadst better not say too much, whilst thou remainest in Lynn,' laughed the friar, 'or I may be beset by all the youth of the place, eager to follow in thy footsteps, to do as thou hast. Ha! ha! ha!'

'As thou hast heard everything, Father, I am spared the risk of being deemed a vain boaster by thee. I can hardly credit my good fortune, all that hath befallen me,

myself, when I look back upon the past few days,' said Geoffrey, 'and I feared I might have some trouble to convince thee of the truth of all I had to tell.'

'I will admit I was incredulous of the facts when I heard them first, though my informant was young Master Robert Braunche, who, as thou knowest, is a most worthy and well-connected young gentleman. He was present with his father at the jousting, and I need scarcely say seemed very envious of thy good fortune. Certes, it is astounding, Geoffrey, that thou shouldst have so leaped up the ladder of life in this way! What next wilt thou do, prithee? Take the French king a prisoner within an hour of thy landing on French soil, or do something equally as wonderful, eh?

'But, joking apart, I am delighted that it should be my favourite pupil who has had this great piece of good luck. Geoffrey, lad, Dame Fortune has given thee a chance she does not give to one in a thousand, nor in ten thousand. But be not puffed up with pride, my son. Remember pride always goeth before a fall. Be modest in thy speech and behaviour, rule thy new life in a fitting and proper manner such as thine own wit and conscience, and the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ would have thee, and I will have no fears for thy continued prosperity. Remember and keep ever before thee the essence of chivalry, which embodies the true principles of Christianity.'

'I will rule my life according to thy teaching, Father —ever strive to follow the right.'

'I am sure thou wilt, fair son. Well, and now when and whither goest thou from Rising with the royal train?'

'We start first thing in the morning, Father, for Southampton, to take ship to France.'

'So soon! Then I shall not see thee again, it may be, for years. Ah, well, Geoffrey, thou takest with thee thy old tutor's blessing, while he will not forget thee in his prayers.'

Geoffrey parted with the good friar, and left the priory with tears in his eyes. Mounting his palfrey, he rode out of the town and took the road back to Castle Rising.

It was a lovely evening. The birds chirruped and twittered amongst the trees, and the sun shot its golden beams slantwise through the branches, tracing delicate, shimmering filigree-patterns upon the sward and paths, while tinting the foliage around with a glorious light. Through the openings in the forest the youth was presently traversing, the western sky could be seen a bright red. The balmy summer air was sweet with the scent of wild flowers and the woods; and everything seemed so peaceful and seductive. The youth presently let his palfrey walk, and unslung his cittern from his back to strum an air upon the strings. He was not permitted to do so, however, for even as he was about to, from out the thick underwood sprang four rough-looking, lusty fellows in the half-armour of archers and billmen.

'Stand!' one of them cried. But before Geoffrey could do so, or make a move at all they rushed upon him, pinned his arms to his sides, and dragged him none too gently to the ground.

'What means this, my masters?' gasped Geoffrey, breathless with his ill-usage and alarm. 'Why do ye molest a peaceful traveller on the high road? Ye look like soldiers, and yet act like robbers.'

'He is a minstrel, mates. We have done an evil thing. His person is sacred,' cried one.

'Not so. I recognize him,' growled another. 'He is a young page of the prince, the same that won the prize in the royal jousts yesterday, and, therefore, a fair prize. Bring his palfrey along. That and his clothes are worth a good sum, if his purse be empty.'

'Hold, friends!' cried Geoffrey, hopefully. 'Ye outlaws, I wot well, never harm one of lowly birth, and such I be, I do assure ye, albeit I have been taken into the noble young prince's favour through a service I rendered him. I am the son of Roger Halford, the keeper of the White Hart hostelry in Lynn.'

'That may or may not be, but by thine own admission thou art allied with the tyrants, and so our enemy and lawful prey. Come along before the captain. He is close by. I would advise thee to come quietly, and utter no shout, or 'twill be the worse for thee.'

Two of them, holding him tightly by the wrists, hurried

him in amongst the trees, while a third led 'Brownie' behind, and the fourth man marched alongside with long-bow in hand and arrow on the string. They did not proceed far when they came to a small glade spangled over with daisies and buttercups. Here, under the shade of an oak of enormous girth, four or five other men in superior yeoman garb were reclining in every attitude of indolence.

'Hullo, who have ye there, lads?' called out one of this group, jumping up and revealing himself as the outlaw of the inn, Dickon o' the Fens, as the forester had styled him.

'None other than the same page of the prince as carried off the prize at the jousting, captain,' replied one of Geoffrey's captors.

'And the same whose musical effort thou wert pleased to commend and express a desire to learn, Sir Robber,' added the youth himself, with another thrill of hope.

'Ah! So 'tis. Release him, men. If he be a gentle now, and one of our hated foes, he be nevertheless a troubadour, and as such safe from our vengeance. Come over here, fair youth! Thy person and property are secure, and were we not so near the high road and Lynn, I would ask thee to sing me that lay anent the English bowman of thine own framing once more, that mine ear might catch its lilt, and my merry men hear it. Sit thee down on that log!'

Geoffrey seated himself as desired, and the outlaw chief threw himself upon the grass before him.

'Thou art a gallant youth, Geoffrey Halford,' went on the robber, 'and my heart warmed for thee, for all thy new alliance with the despots of this fair land, when I saw thee overthrow so many of the gently born, proud and arrogant youths, including the young sprig of royalty itself, in the lists yesterday. But why shouldst thou take sides against those of thine own birth, and join them who trample upon their rights as free-born Englishmen?'

'I have not taken sides against my fellow-commoners, if I may make so bold as to tell thee, Master Outlaw,' replied Geoffrey. 'Though I have been made a gentleman by his noble young Grace, the Prince of

Wales, I shall never turn my back on my old friends and neighbours.'

'Ah, thou mayst say so, but I know thy heart will soon be estranged by thy connexion with the court, and that thou art like to treat them even worse than thy masters in order to curry greater favour with these. I have seen it before. Men raised from a lowly station like thou turn round and treat those formerly their equals with greater harshness even than the born tyrants themselves.'

'Nay, I should be a mean-spirited caitiff indeed, an I acted so; but are ye not as much oppressors of the weak and helpless every whit as ever was the most despotic noble that yet breathed?'

'Have a care, young sir!' growled the outlaw, knitting his brows and flashing a fierce look from under them. 'How makest us out oppressors of the poor?'

'Of the weak and the helpless, I said. If an unarmed traveller fall into your hands, or half-a-dozen of ye, not by force of arms but by mean ambush, take a brave knight or squire at disadvantage, ye plunder and ill-treat him. Is not that oppression in its worst sense? Ye, the stronger, prey upon the weaker. Keep your temper — be not wroth with me! Ye started the argument.'

'Well, well, continue,' laughed the outlaw chief, the scowl vanishing from his face and a smile of good humour breaking over it.

'I have not much more to say,' went on Geoffrey. 'But, honestly now, would ye not rather be at peace with all men, live without being in daily—nay, hourly, fear of your lives? Ye must know that if the King or the nobles really took into their heads to hunt ye down, to beat the fens ye make your refuge, and surround ye there, they could give ye all a short shrift.'

'Let them try it—let them come against us. We should give a good account of ourselves. What say ye, lads?' cried Dickon, with his face darkening again.

'That is not the point,' pursued Geoffrey. 'The point is why should Englishmen war on Englishmen, and keep up this foolish internecine strife when the French are knocking at our very doors, or at least may

do so any day, if we do not chastise them on their own ground? Wilt listen to me a little longer? I have the ear of the gracious young prince, and I know his kindly heart towards all who bear the name of Englishmen. If he were to grant ye all a free pardon, on condition ye fought for England against England's only real foes, the French, would ye do so?'

'The Prince of Wales is not the King of England, boy, and even if he had the power to pardon us, he would not do so. Besides, we are outlaws, and no man need keep faith with us. A false promise of pardon might be extended to us, and then we should be massacred if we were such fools as to trust to it.'

But for all his bitter words, there was a look of something like eager hope on the outlaw chief's face, which Geoffrey noted with a beating heart.

'Edward of Wales and his royal father keep faith with all men,' he made answer. 'The royal word would be law; and the King would never oppose the express wish of his son, I wot well. He loves the gallant youth too much, and can refuse him naught. Listen to me! I will plead for ye with his Grace this very night an ye suffer me to return to Castle Rising; and if ye are wise ye will send a messenger to the village cross to receive his reply.'

Dickon o' the Fens leaped up and began pacing the sward to and fro, with his chin sunk upon his breast. Diverse expressions flitted across his rugged face, which our young page watched intently and hopefully. The other outlaws also regarded their leader with pained interest and anxiety.

'I feel confident,' continued Geoffrey, 'that the generous young prince will not turn a deaf ear to my petition on your behalf; and think not that he will play ye false, or that I will. If I succeed in my mission, in obtaining the King's pardon for ye, I will be at Rising Village cross at midnight to meet any messenger ye care to send. An ye fear treachery, none of yourselves need come, ye may send some serf or villein, but once ye have his Majesty's own royal pardon ye cannot doubt but that it will protect ye. Come, Master Dickon, what sayest thou?'

The outlaw turned and confronted him.

'This; that I am willing to accept the King's pardon, an' it be extended me, and I know that there is not a man in my band who will not do the same. Go to Edward of Wales, good youth, and tell him that Dickon o' the Fens and fourscore other skilled bowmen, outlaws at present, will give up their wild lives and take service under him against the French, will go to the French wars and fight for the glory of Old England, if he will guarantee them their lives and liberties, pardon them all their past offences. What say ye, lads? Will ye follow your old chief in this—agree with him to accept the King's mercy?'

'We will! We will!' cried all the fellows around, one growling the addition: 'If it will be offered to us.'

'It will be, I am sure,' said Geoffrey delightedly. 'The young prince is the soul of generosity, and he will gladly welcome eighty good fighting men. And what he wishes the King will grant.'

'Give him his palfrey,' ordered the captain. 'Farewell, gallant youth! Thou mayest not succeed in thy kindly mission, but whether thou dost or no thou hast made the Rangers of the Fens thy friends for life, for I am satisfied thou meanest to do as thou promisest, and art not merely poking fun at us. A messenger will be at Rising Cross at midnight to learn whether it is to be friendship or continued hostility between us and royalty. Thou mayst go thy way! Come, lads, we will beat up the others!'

The outlaw chief waved his arm and strode off with his men, and Geoffrey, mounting, rode away at full speed to Rising. Dusk was falling as he cantered up to the barbican. Having seen 'Brownie' stabled in the Castle stalls, he repaired to his quarters, where he found Reginald Mortloe and his two brother pages busily polishing their own and their royal master's arms and weapons. The squire and Arveley greeted him cordially.

'Where may I find his Grace, Rex?' Geoffrey asked. 'I would have speech with him forthwith on a matter of some little moment, an I may.'

'Thou'lt find him alone in his room; and thou mayst go to him, methinks,' replied Mortloe.

Geoffrey proceeded to the prince's apartments and met the gallant youth coming out.

'Ah! thou art returned then, Geoffrey! Dost want to speak with me?'

'I do, an it please thee, my lord.'

'Come inside. I was going in search of my royal father, but I can spare thee a few minutes. What is't?'

'Your Grace, as I was returning hither from Lynn I fell into the hands of outlaws, the Rangers of the Fens, as they call themselves. I had speech with their leader, the bold varlet who goes by the name of Dickon o' the Fens. He spared my life on account of a song I sang in praise of our English bowmen, and I took advantage of the mercy to argue with him on the wickedness of his and his men's doings. I did more, my lord. I made so bold as to say that I believed, an they agreed to abandon their wild deeds and come in and swear fealty to your royal father, that you, O my gracious prince, in your noble generosity and kindheartedness might pardon them and take them into your service as a company of archers for the French wars.

'My lord, I wot well that the miscreants deserve no such tender mercy, that they have sinned beyond it, but I have myself had such proofs of your generosity that I hoped you might do this great and magnanimous act. They jumped at the idea; they are penitent, I do assure you, and one word from you to your royal father would suffice to turn them from savage desperadoes into leal and honest men. They are ready to fight for you against the French, an you grant them their lives and their liberties.'

The prince had screwed up his face thoughtfully and tightened his lips.

'Humph!' he said. 'The varlets would fight for us! They are all good bowmen, and must number close on a hundred. We can always do with men. But they have been guilty of most atrocious crimes. By my halidom, Geoffrey, 'tis not a bad idea! It would rid the land of a pest, and 'tis a scandal there should be so many of these bands of outlaws. They would make good fighting material.'

'Thou dost not think my royal father's clemency

would be thrown away on the varlets?' he asked, presently.

'I do not, your Grace. The captain, Dickon, seemed most anxious and hopeful at my proposition. A messenger from him is to be at Rising Cross this midnight to learn the result of my pleading with thee.'

Again the prince was silent, then he said:

'It's a pity so many stout Englishmen should be at war with their own countrymen, lost to their country's service, when there is so much need for a firm front to be shown the foreign foe. And I am averse to the shedding of their blood. Geoffrey, I will take the varlets at their word. I will go to my father now and lay the matter before him. Return hither in an hour's time, and I will let thee know what message to bear to the knaves.'

'O, most magnanimous Grace, I am satisfied already that you will obtain clemency for these poor wretches, that you will plead with your royal father for them.'

'Nay, nay, I make no promise. It is not in my power to pardon them. It all depends on my father.'

'But if you plead for them, your Grace, his Majesty will consent.'

'I will plead their cause, I give thee that promise. Now, begone, and see me in an hour's time!'

XII

THE TRYST AT RISING CROSS

'HERE is the King's pardon, Geoffrey,' said the Black Prince when the page presented himself at his lord's apartments, 'writ in my Lord Chandos' own clerkly hand and signed and sealed by my royal father. It granteth life and a free passport to Southampton to the roberdsman yclept Dickon o' the Fens and all of his band, conditionally that they enlist under the banner of England and fight the French.'

'Oh, my most noble liege, heaven will reward you and his Majesty for this magnanimity. I had no doubt of the success of your high-minded intercession.'

'Nay, speak not of my mediation in such terms, Geoffrey,' replied the youthful prince with a smile. 'It be not so high-minded as thine own. Thou hadst no object to gain, whilst mine was in a measure a selfish one, for I coveted those hundred tall Englishmen for our banners. I will accompany thee to the tryst to-night and speak in person with the varlet's messenger, that so they may be fully assured we mean honestly by them.'

'Oh, no, your Grace, you must not do aught so knight-errant. Bethink you of the dire risk you would run. These roberdsmen may be in force close by the rendezvous, and the temptation to seize your exalted person might be stronger than their hope to secure pardon on the terms offered. I—I cannot hear of——'

'Thou naughty page,' interrupted the prince. 'I should be wroth with thee for presuming to dictate to thy lord and master, attempting to order my conduct in this matter, did I not know that 'tis out of thy deep love and care for me thou speakest. But when Edward of Wales sayeth he will do a thing, no one may gain-

say him. I have decided to accompany thee, Geoffrey, so no more from thee.'

'Oh, but, my noble lord, at the cost of your displeasure I must beseech you to bethink you more of the hazard to England's royal heir. Oh, it is not meet that you, my gracious liege, should stoop to treating with a robber's envoy.'

'I have warned thee, Geoffrey. Another word, and we quarrel.'

'Then am I dumb, my lord. But at least thou wilt bring an escort of stout arms with thee?'

'Nay, I go with thee alone. Edward of Wales feareth no man on English soil. Not one more word now. Come to me here at half-past the eleventh hour. Tell no one, not even Mortloe, of our purpose. I will see to our leaving the castle without the warders being a whit the wiser.'

Geoffrey was much perturbed at the idea of the prince accompanying him. If anything happened to the heir-apparent he would doubtless be held responsible. The royal youth's own wilful and imperious temper might not save him from the King's awful rage. There was nothing for it but to trust to the good faith of Dickon o' the Fens, who had already shown he was not wholly lost to generous feeling.

Punctually to the minute the page repaired to his patron's rooms, and found the gallant youth ready for the adventurous enterprise, disguised in a long cloak of sober hue, completely draping his form, and a slouched hat pulled well over his brows.

'I am ready, thou seest, Geoffrey,' he said blithely. 'Don that cloak and hat, and thou and I will go.'

They left the room, the sentry at the door saluting them with his brown bill with a stolid face, betraying no symptoms of the surprise he may have felt. They hurried along the dimly lantern-lighted corridor to the guard-room, where the half-dozen archers on duty stood silently at attention. Descending the perron or stairway to the portal, they found this ajar with two warders guarding it. The men saluted as the royal youth pushed up the brim of his hat, revealing his features by the light of the swinging horn lantern, and held open the massive door

respectfully. Passing out, the prince led the way round the corner of the keep to the west side, making towards the little Saxon chapel there, instead of the gate-house, to Geoffrey's astonishment.

It was pitch-black night, without a star being visible, and the sentinels patrolling the surrounding earthworks did not even show up against the sky. As the pair gained the dense shrubbery around the old church, the murmur of voices struck upon their ears, and two figures loomed up suddenly close by—that of a very tall man and a lady of medium stature.

'Madam, 'tis useless for you to deny your complicity in this plot,' said the voice of the King. 'That doubly-forsworn traitor and recreant, Sir John de Maltravers, had speech with you by appointment here on this very spot two nights before the ambush.'

'And do you believe the assertions of men under torture before the solemn word of your own mother, Edward?' came the reply, in resentful yet sauve tones.

Geoffrey Halford recognized at once, with a thrill of consternation, the tones as those of 'the Dark Lady,' the dreadful Queen Dowager.

'The wretches were subjected to no torture, madam, I put no such paltry slaves to torments, wotting well they are but the dupes of their lords and masters. Had I the latter in my power, they should most assuredly make the acquaintance of the rack or the sachentage. I visited the prisoners personally with the Lord Chandos in their dungeons, and offered them life and service under my banner on condition they disclosed the names of the heads of this conspiracy, of those nobles concerned in it. And one and all assured me this accursed traitor, Maltravers, was the promoter of it, at your instance, my gentle mother.'

Geoffrey heard no more, for the Prince of Wales gripped him tightly by the arm and drew him noiselessly away in the opposite direction to the speakers. The prince released him, as they gained the door of the chapel. Softly raising the heavy latch, the young scion of royalty pushed upon it and the door opened without a creak.

They slipped inside. A dim religious light pervaded

the interior, proceeding from the sanctuary lamps hanging in front of the altars, which glittered with gold and precious stones and richly-tinted hangings.

Stealing between the massive pillars supporting the groined roof, the prince approached the stone font, which now stands in Rising Church. It is square in shape and has heads carved at the corners and interlacing work round the stem.

Stooping, the prince pressed a hidden spring in the carving of the stem, and the font and its base instantly and silently moved aside, disclosing a dark aperture in the floor. A narrow, steep, stone stair led down, and stepping on to it and signing to Geoffrey to follow, Prince Edward descended boldly into the inky depths. As our hero was cautiously groping his way after his royal guide, feeling with one foot for the next step and hanging on to the cold, damp wall with his hands, there came the dull thud of the font closing into its place over him. Then followed the clink of steel on flint, a spark or two flashed, there was a sudden burst of flame, and he saw the prince lighting a torch at the foot of the steps with some blazing tinder. He sprang quickly down and joined his lord, who handed him the torch, saying :

'One flambeau will suffice. Come! This passage will bring us out in Rising Churchyard.'

Geoffrey saw they were in a vaulted stone passage striking away through the bowels of the earth. Heaped against the wall at the foot of the steep stair they had just come down were a number of ready-made torches. Only a short distance did they proceed along the gallery, when they came to a second, but not so steep, flight of stone steps leading downwards.

A foul, dank smell came up from the forbidding depths—the smell of a tomb. They descended, until Geoffrey knew they must be deep below the moat, then they reached another vaulted passage, and a cold draught blew in their faces and strung out the flame of the torch into a long, reeking pennon. Water dripped upon them and splashed upon the flags at their feet, and a foul ooze exuded from the wall on either hand, while the stench was wellnigh insupportable. Hurrying along, the passage became drier when they had passed under the

moat, though still the earthy, tomb-like smell filled their nostrils. The passage ran on in a perfectly straight line for some distance, and presently Geoffrey saw it ended in a stone stair leading upwards. When they gained and mounted this, the prince said:

'You may extinguish the torch now, Geoffrey. We will not need it further until our return.'

He pointed to a stone extinguisher at one side of the vault, and, thrusting the flambeau up this, Geoffrey put it out. Then as he stood in the Stygian darkness, there came the rumble of unseen machinery, and the great flagstone immediately over his head slid aside, and the few stars in the pall-like heavens twinkled at him, while the fresh, pure air of the outer world drove the foul air of the vault away. Springing up the remaining steps, the two youths emerged from the false grave which masked the outlet of the secret passage, and found themselves close by the churchyard-gate.

'Geoffrey,' said the Black Prince, as they stole from the consecrated ground, 'thou didst recognize the speakers in the shrubbery?'

'I did, my lord.'

'Then thou wilt pleasure me by forgetting, completely effacing from thy memory as if it had never been, the dialogue thou didst overhear.'

'Thy pleasure is my will, O noble liege. The incident is as good as wiped from the tablets of my memory.'

''Tis well. See that thou never recallest it even in thine own mind, much less breathe it to a living soul, under pain of my deepest anger.'

While speaking, they had reached the village green; and there, sitting on the steps of the cross, was a man, wrapped in a long green cassock or cloak and with a plumed cap pulled over his brows. His chin rested on one hand and he seemed lost in deep reflection. He did not move until they were close up to him, then he gave a violent start and sprang to his feet.

'Two!' he growled. 'I expected to meet but one.'

'Fear not, friend,' said the prince, gently. 'I am Edward of Wales.'

'The Prince of Wales!' gasped the man, recoiling and casting an anxious, alarmed look around.

'Yea, but again I say fear not. I have come hither, attended only by my page, to deliver to thee the message of my royal father. I hold here a free pardon, properly signed and sealed, for all the outlaws who roam the fens, conditionally, that they march to Southampton and there join the forces at present mustering to fight on French soil. Thou mayst be trusted to convey this cartel to him yclept Dickon o' the Fens?'

With a hoarse, ecstatic cry of joy, the stranger doffed his plumed cap, revealing the features of the outlaw chief, and threw himself upon his knees before the young prince.

'O my most generous and magnanimous liege, Dickon o' the Fens kneeleth before you. On behalf of himself and all his band, he accepts your terms, and joyously hails the chance of being an honest man again and fighting for the cause of his country. Oh, words fail me, your sweet Grace, to fitly express my joy at being thus received once more amongst your royal subjects.'

'So thou art this bold varlet, Dickon o' the Fens, himself,' replied the prince, eyeing him with keen interest and evident approval. ''Tis well, I had rather speech with thee personally, than a go-between. So! The matter is settled. Here is the King's pardon. It will be faithfully observed. I pass ye the promise of one whose boast shall ever be he never broke his word, and ye on your part, fulfil the conditions thereof.'

'That your Grace's word is your bond, I need no assurance,' returned Dickon, brokenly, and still upon his knees. 'I am a free man once more, blessed be God!'

'Thou art, and rejoiced am I to see thee so truly penitent and grateful. Rise up now, and go thy way. Lose no time in taking thy band to Southampton, for we set sail within the week. Fail not, an thou wouldst retain the favour meted to thee, to report thyself to me the day of thy arrival at the port. How many dost thy band number?'

'I answer thee in very truth, your noble Grace, when I say the Green Cassocks number in all one hundred and eighty-three lusty bowmen. I told thy gallant young

page yonder but four score, but you and he will excuse me that lie on the ground of caution—military necessity.'

The Black Prince laughed, and his face wore a gratified smile as he rejoined:

'' 'Tis better even than I bargained for. I counted upon about a hundred recruits. Thou art a shrewd varlet, Dickon. We may perchance see our way to making thee a centenar over thine own Green Cassocks. Farewell! peace be with thee! We meet at Southampton.'

With a rapturous, incoherent exclamation, the pardoned outlaw caught up the hem of the prince's cloak and kissed it. Signing to Geoffrey to follow him, Prince Edward turned away and strode from the spot. Our hero, glancing back over his shoulder, saw Dickon o' the Fens throw himself upon his knees with upraised, working face and clasped hands.

Not a word did the Black Prince utter until they had descended through the false, sliding tomb in Rising Churchyard and were once more traversing the secret passage to the castle.

'Geoffrey Halford,' he said then, 'thou hast this day done thy country a service but little short of that which first recommended thee to my notice. Thou hast given England one hundred and eighty-three stout fighting men, and cleared these parts of a woful pest. The day that sees me graced with the gold spurs of knighthood, that same day wilt thou wear the silver ones of a squire!'

XIII

THE FORD AT BLANCHETAQUE

The dawn had broken, and loud were sounding tuckets and the beat of drums. The men-at-arms and archers were already drawn up in marching order in the outer bailey of the castle without the moat, while the inner court was thronged with bustling knights, squires, and pages, all in armour girt. Charges and hacks were neighing and champing and pawing the earth restively.

Geoffrey Halford stood beside his fellow-page, Lancelot Arveley, at the portal of the keep, holding the prince's palfrey as well as their own mounts by the bridles. Around them were the royal and other squires and pages, waiting likewise for the appearance of their lords. 'Silver Blaze,' as our hero had named his magnificent coal-black charger with the blaze on its forehead—his prize of the jousts—was amongst the train of steeds in the care of the attendants, waiting outside the barbican with the soldiers. Reginald Mortloe and Cyril Branscombe were with the prince in his apartment.

Close by Geoffrey stood Rupert de Mowbray, with a sad, pensive face. His father, like Chandos and the other lords and barons, was in the King's antechamber.

Presently down the stone steps of the perron came tripping pretty Sybil Penthony, with her trailing skirts looped up to unimpede her dainty feet. She looked shyly about her, then, singling out Rupert, advanced towards him; whereon Geoffrey's heart, which had beat fast at sight of her, sank like lead in his bosom. Offering her hand to the young squire, she said in tones audible to the hero:

'Good-bye, Rupert, and may Heaven shield thee through all! That thou mayst return safely to Hunstanton and thine old friends of Rising is my sincere prayer.'

Young de Mowbray whispered something in reply, with glowing, eager face and burning eyes, as he drew her somewhat apart from the others. Geoffrey, watching them covertly, saw her shake her head coquettishly, as if refusing some request. He appeared to plead earnestly with her, but she only shook her head and answered him merrily.

While they were talking together her sister came out of the portal. A flush of something like anger crossed the Lady Beatrice's face when she saw the pair in such intimate converse; her lips tightened, and she drew herself up haughtily. But, nevertheless, she crossed immediately towards them.

'Ah! Here is Beatrice to say good-bye also to thee, Rupert,' cried Sybil. 'I will leave thee, then. I must see thy father and bid him farewell. I go to find him.'

Rupert's face clouded, and Geoffrey saw he would fain have detained the little hand he held; but Sybil drew it away, and tripped back towards the perron.

'Where didst leave Sir Eustace, Trixy?' she asked her sister.

'In the King's antechamber, with papa and mamma,' replied the Lady Beatrice, stiffly.

Sybil paused at the door of the keep, and glanced coquettishly at Geoffrey. With a thrill of hope and delight he doffed his plumed cap, for, though his body was mailed, his helmet and shield and arms, of course, were on the back of his destrier.

'Good morrow to thee, gentle youth,' said Sybil, approaching him with a curtsy. 'It were not meet that I should let thee depart for the wars without wishing thee good-bye, after the honour thou didst confer upon me at the tourney. Fare thee also well, Master Halford! I trust thou wilt return in safety from these cruel wars, and win distinction in them.'

'Thanks, sweet madam,' replied Geoffrey, rather coldly, for he saw that, while speaking to him, she was slyly watching the leave-taking of her sister and Rupert.

She did not turn away, but went on in a softer tone, veiling her watchful gaze upon Rupert and the Lady Beatrice with her long silken lashes, while a faint tinge of colour crept into her cheek.

'Thou dost not ask me for any favour or token to wear in the wars, Master Halford—for any memento of our acquaintance and joint-rule at the jousting banquet?'

'I dared not make so bold, gracious lady,' stammered Geoffrey, all his late ambitious hopes and longings surging up again in his breast at her unlooked-for remark. 'I be but a humble page, while thou art a great, high-born damosel.'

She laughed merrily and tossed her sunny curls, but still Geoffrey noted, with conflicting feelings, that her eyes were directed towards his rival and her sister.

'Faint heart never won fair lady, gentle page,' she whispered. 'If thou dost so under-estimate thyself, thou wilt never be looked on with favouring eyes by my sex. Howbeit, I will stoop to thy lowliness, and, for the sake of the proud distinction thou gavest me at the tourney, confer this glove on thee as some slight token of my gratitude and remembrance of the event.'

She thrust into his hand one of her daintily-worked yellow kid gauntlets, and whisked away, running back up the stone steps before he had time in his delighted astonishment to utter a word.

'Didst see that, Barnaby? She refused Rupert de Mowbray the same glove, and conferred it, unasked, upon this obscure young springald, who hath no better claim upon her than that he made her Queen of the Tourney?'

The speaker was the Lady Alicia Crosbie, who was standing at some little distance from the scene, beside the King's jester.

'I saw it, madam,' grinned Barnaby.

'Thou shouldst have no difficulty in setting them by the ears after this. She gave him the glove when she saw Rupert out of pique, ask for and receive her sister's veil. It could not have been better. Thou must let Rupert know of the gift, good Barnaby, and I leave it to thy own shrewd wit to rouse all his jealous hate of this malapert page. Drop hints before him that this young Halford lifts his eyes to the Lady Sybil, and that she favours his ambitious suit.'

'Rely on me, madam. It will not be my fault an one or other of them ever return from France.'

'Fail me not. Get one of the hated young springalds slain by the other. I care not which falls so long as he doth by the other's hand, though I could wish it be the proud lord's heir, for that would be a greater blow to him; and the reward I promised is thine, good Barnaby.'

'It will be Master Rupert, and I can order matters, most generous madam.'

Geoffrey stood amazed at Sybil's condescension, then he hastily thrust the glove inside his cap.

'Thou art well-favoured, indeed, Geoffrey,' said his fellow-page, with a meaning smile. ''Tis not every one the Lady Sybil would so honour, I trow. Rupert de Mowbray will bear thee no goodwill an he learn thou hast been so favoured. Keep that glove out of his sight, an thou wouldst not find thyself at swords drawn with him.'

'Cease thy raillery, Lance! The Lady Sybil but conferred the favour on me as a memento of the jousts, in bare gratitude for the honour it was my good fortune to bestow upon her.'

'Rupert will not look on it in that light,' laughed Arveley. 'But here come his Majesty and his Grace.'

There was a bustle among the group of pages and squires, the clang of armour, as the royal party issued from the keep; and the warders on the walls signalled its advent to the waiting companies and troops without the earthworks, by a fanfare of trumpets and the prolonged roll of nakirs. Both the King and the prince wore all their armour except their helmets, as well as their magnificent jupons or surcoats, emblazoned with the arms of England and France, worked in gold and silver. The surcoat was so long at this period as to be apt to entangle the feet when the wearer was dismounted, but it was seldom worn save on the march when the sun was hot. Sir John Chandos was destined to meet his end, years later, through stumbling from this very cause in the battle-shock, when his horse was killed under him.

Reginald Mortloe held his young lord's stirrup while the latter mounted. Sir Henry Penthony did the like service for his liege and departing guest.

All the lords, knights, squires, and pages then sprang to horse, and amidst 'good-byes,' and 'God be with you, noble gentlemen,' from the castle servants, the

waving of kerchiefs and veils, from lattice and turret, by the ladies of the household, more tuckets and beating of drums by the warders on the earthworks, the glittering retinue cantered out of the bailey across the stone bridge and joined the vast and no less martial, if not so splendid, array without.

The men-at-arms led off the march with the pensils of their lords fluttering from their lanceheads. Behind them stepped out the royal archers in their snowy jupons, adorned with the red cross of St. George over their brigandines, and with their backs and their leathern quivers abristle with greygoose shafts. After them went the trumpeters and drummers, waking all the echoes of earthwork and hill with their blatant din, and then the billmen and pikemen — rough, uncouth, shaggy-headed fellows—with sloped arms. The knights, baronets, and bachelors followed upon their champing steeds, and then, in the midst of his lords and barons, the royal Edward himself, succeeded by his son's bodyguard and the long train of squires and pages.

More companies of men-at-arms, archers, and billmen swung along after, with the sumpter horses, packmules, and baggage-wagons and the royal litter. The rear of the long procession was brought up by the numerous followers of the Lords de Mowbray, Erpingham, de Molines, de Walsoken, and other Norfolk chivalry, all of whom had joined the banner of the sovereign for foreign service at Castle Rising. It was, therefore, quite a small army that thus marched through the sleepy little village, past the old Norman church, disturbing the white dust upon the highway, as it was not wont to be.

Rupert rode beside his father at the head of the retainers of their noble house; and Geoffrey Halford in close attendance on the prince. The villagers flocked to their doors and cheered to the echo of the tramping feet, the children especially. Many of the women sobbed in their aprons at the thought that many a loved one in that imposing array might never return, and called out shrill farewells to husbands, fathers, sons, and sweethearts.

By easy stages the column, swelled *en route* by

numerous other levies, reached Southampton, where had already assembled the other divisions of the great army, mustered for the invasion of France. Eleven hundred large and five hundred small 'cogges,' or ships, were crowded in the harbour for its transport across the English Channel.

Geoffrey Halford was full of wonderment and enthusiasm at the sights and sounds of the bustling port. The night of their arrival in it saw him aboard and bidding good-bye to Old England's shores, for he knew not how long. 'It might be for years, and it might be for ever.' All the mighty host had been embarked hastily, for the wind was fair, and King Edward had been baulked the month before in his intended voyage to Guienne by contrary winds, and did not mean to be again, if he could help it.

Most, indeed, of the troops had been embarked in readiness to set sail on the monarch's arrival.

The French count, Geoffrey D'Arcourt, who had fled to Edward's court from the ill-treatment of the French king, according to his own story, had persuaded the English monarch to direct his course for Normandy instead of Guienne, urging that the northern province was almost destitute of military force, and that the flourishing cities there would well repay the expedition in plunder. King Edward, knowing no reason for doubting the adviser's good faith, believing his story of his suzerain's harsh treatment, had determined on following his counsel.

As the fleet spread sail and stood out of the harbour, to the sound of trumpets and drum, Geoffrey Halford stood on the high poop, or after-castle, of the prince's ship, amongst his fellow-pages, close by the knot of nobles and knights surrounding his lord. A frenzied burst of cheering from the forecastle and waist of a 'cogge' upon their starboard quarter drew his eyes in its direction. He saw a crowd of archers in the green cassocks of foresters or rangers, without any device to tell the name and lineage of their lord, lining the bulwark, waving their plumed hats and hurrahing enthusiastically.

A man sprang into the shrouds of the other vessel. It

was the ex-outlaw chief, wearing the badge of a centenar, or officer commanding a hundred men, upon his Lincoln green livery.

'Three cheers with all your might, lads, for his magnanimous Grace!' he roared. 'Edward of Wales for ever!'

The cheers were heartily given, and the Black Prince smiled, and his eyes kindled with gratified pride at the ovation.

'And now another three, men, for the gallant young page who was the agent of our redemption,' cried Dickon o' the Fens again. 'There he stands upon the poop. 'Tis he with the fair hair and the prince's cognizance upon his sleeve. Long life to Geoffrey Halford, the friend of the Archers of the Fens!'

And cheer after cheer again welled up from the lusty throats of those grateful English hearts, while their recipient, with a swelling bosom, waved his cap in acknowledgement.

It was on the 12th of July that the English host landed at Cape La Hogue in France. There, on the yellow beach, on stepping out of the boats, King Edward bade the young Prince of Wales kneel before him, and, drawing his sword, touched him on the shoulder with it, knighting the gallant youth. A similar honour was conferred upon several of the young nobility, including Rupert de Mowbray.

The Earl of Arundel was created constable of the army, and the Earl of Warwick and the secret spy and betrayer, the French Lord Geoffrey D'Arcourt, marshals. The greater part of the fleet was sent back to England; and the Earl of Huntingdon was put in command of the rest and ordered to cruise along the coast and destroy all the vessels which the King of France had equipped in different ports for an invasion of England.

While the tents were being pitched upon the lonely dunes, the prince summoned Geoffrey Halford to his side.

'Geoffrey,' said his lord, 'thou rememberest my promise to thee the night before we left Castle Rising, that the same day that saw me wearing the gold spurs of knighthood, that same day would see thee wearing the silver ones of a squire? Kneel, my gallant page!'

With a joyous, grateful heart, our young hero dropped on one knee, and the gallant prince, tapping him on the left shoulder with his gauntlet, cried : ' Geoffrey Halford, page of my body, didst thou kneel down. Rise up, Geoffrey Halford, squire of my body ! '

The new-made squire rose; and the prince, shaking him warmly by the hand, said :

' I shall give thee thine arms and motto later. Mortloe, take these silver spurs and buckle them upon thy brother squire's sollerets.'*

Reginald attached the spurs to Geoffrey's steel-clad heels; and then, cutting short the overjoyed youth's expression of thanks, the prince dismissed them. That night Geoffrey indited two letters—one to his father, the other to Friar Nicholas, informing them of his promotion.

Dividing his army, which numbered thirty thousand men, into three divisions, the English King advanced towards Valognes, pillaging and laying waste the country as he marched. Geoffrey Halford's kind heart bled at the awful scenes he now witnessed. Dire havoc was wrought on every hand, the harvests were trampled under foot.

' Oh, this is dreadful, dreadful, Rex ! ' he moaned at night to Mortloe, when the whole devastating host was gathered into one great camp. ' I always looked on war as glorious, but now I feel disposed to hate it and wish I never had left Lynn.'

' War is always a terrible business, Geoff,' replied his brother-squire, ' and this sad work invariably following in its train is perforce necessary when in an enemy's country. His resources must be destroyed and terror must pave the way to triumph by force of arms. Moreover, the King is incensed, and justly so, at the treachery of that French recreant Count Geoffrey D'Arcourt.'

' What ! The Count D'Arcourt has betrayed his benefactor and protector? I had not heard.'

' 'Tis true enow. I heard it in camp this morn. The recreant was sent specially to England to plot treason against his Majesty with the Dowager Queen at Castle Rising. He it was, there is no doubt, who organized the ambush thou wert so instrumental in frustrating on

* Steel shoes.

Rising Heath; and he came back with us to Normandy, and induced the King to land at La Hogue in the furtherance of a design he had formed with Philip of Valois, his secret abettor, to entrap us. Their plot failed through the French king's lassitude. Had Count D'Arcourt's plans succeeded, we would have been beset, surrounded on all sides by an overwhelming force, immediately on leaving the coast.'

'Thou takest my breath away, Rex. Count D'Arcourt a secret spy of the man he had feigned to detest as a cruel tyrant! And King Edward had made him one of the marshals of the army. But how did his villainy transpire, and where is he?'

'Fled to Paris with his squires and vassal-knights and their following, leaving a defiant and impertinent message in his tent to the effect that he hoped shortly to return and have the pleasure of leading King Edward and the Prince of Wales captives to his master in double-dealing.'

'Small wonder then this awful work of devastation has been inaugurated. I can well imagine his Majesty's rage. But it does not become him, the very Flower of Chivalry as he hath always shown himself, to thus revenge himself upon the hapless people around.'

Mortloe coughed.

'Thou hadst better not voice that sentiment within the hearing of other ears, Geoffrey,' he said. 'Else these new silver spurs of thine may be hacked from thy heels by the cleaver of the royal cook, if peradventure thou meetest with no worse fate. It doth not do to criticize the actions of kings and princes, my tender-hearted young comrade.'

The Count D'Arcourt was not long in fulfilling his threat so far as striving to overwhelm King Edward went. He prevailed on the pleasure-loving Philip of Valois to dispatch the Constable of France, Count D'Eu, to attack the English, who had sat down before the rich and populous city of Caen. The townspeople, at sight of the reinforcements advancing to their relief, sallied out upon the camp. But the relief force fell into an ambush laid for it by Edward, warned by his scouts of its approach, and the undisciplined townsmen were no match for the

veteran soldiers of England. They were driven pell-mell back inside their gates, the conquerors entering with them, and the city was taken; while the Count D'Eu and his second-in-command were made prisoners, and their troops driven back upon Paris with great slaughter.

Elated at this signal triumph, King Edward marched towards Paris. Some of the Irish and Welsh mercenaries carried their excursions indeed to the very gates of the French capital and stirred Philip of Valois into something like spirited action. He assembled an army of a hundred thousand men; and, afraid of being surrounded, the English monarch retreated towards Flanders. On the bank of the Somme he found his way barred. All the bridges were either broken down or strongly guarded, and the opposite bank was held by twenty thousand Frenchmen under Godemar de Faye, while Philip's mighty host was rapidly coming up in the rear. The English were taken between two fires with a vengeance. There seemed no way of escape from complete annihilation, utter and absolute ruin.

'It looketh as if this is going to be the end of it,' groaned Reginald Mortloe, as he sat his horse beside Geoffrey Halford, in the halted ranks facing the broad and deep river, gleaming dully in the faint light of the stars, for it was night, and a dark one at that.

Away across the river could be discerned the sheen of Godemar de Faye's vigilant spears, and his bugles rang watchfulness all along the bank, while his camp fires tinged the distant sky with a ruddy glow.

'And if it be,' Geoffrey whispered back, for loud talking had been strictly prohibited with a view to concealing their movements from the foe, 'we can but die once, and I trow well these thirty thousand men around us will die hard, need some killing. As for myself, I pant for a good handy-grips with the armed foe. I have had enow of conquering unarmed or only half-armed citizens and boors. I want to meet the French soldier again as we did at Caen.'

'Thou'lt have thy wish shortly, lad, i' faith. But, hush! Here cometh the King, surely, from the size of the cavalcade. Peradventure a ford hath been found.'

It was the King, attended by his son, Chandos, and all the chief lords of his realm. A sour-looking French peasant, with towzled head and ragged, besmirched clothes, and his arms bound behind his back, marched before them between two stalwart archers.

'Let the whole army follow, my Lord Warwick,' said King Edward. 'We cannot be in a worse extremity than we are, even an this fellow play us false. But methinks from the look of him he hath no mind to sacrifice his wretched carcase for the good of his country. Howbeit, we must adventure this ford he calls Blanchetaque—"White Spot."'

The royal party rode on, and Geoffrey and Reginald hurried back to their tent, meeting the under officers rushing to and fro, getting their men under arms as silently and quickly as possible. Along the river the army marched, but the ford was not reached until the rising sun was gliding the forest leaves and hill-tops. Its rays showed the crawling, snake-like columns to Godemar's sentinels who were watching the passage. The Frenchmen's bugles sounded the alarm and the call to arms, and their battalions came swarming down to dispute the crossing of the river, to hold our countrymen in check until their friends in pursuit came up and completed the surround and carnage.

On that crucial moment depended the fortunes of England and England's monarch. The ford was not more than a foot deep, but the tide must shortly flow from the sea, and render all passage impossible. Moreover, horsemen came in on the spur from the rearguard with the news that Philip's mighty host was in sight, coming up apace. King Edward was equal to the occasion, and proved himself the splendid warrior he was.

'Let the archers line the bank of the river,' he ordered, 'and ply the foe before us incessantly with their shafts, and now, let those who love me, follow!'

So crying, he rode his horse into the river, waving his sword above his head.

St. George for Merrie England! God with us and King Edward!' shouted the knights and nobles around, and they splashed into the water after him, followed by the whole of the third division. The French cross-

bowmen loosed their bolts, but these were ill-directed for the most part, for the English grey-goose shafts, flying thick and fast as hail, prevented anything like steady or accurate marksmanship. And the English knights and men-at-arms, raising their shields, caught the few missiles that hurtled down amongst them. Forward, in serried walls of steel, thundered the chivalry of France to obstruct the passage, to hurl back the daring English into the rising tide. But that ceaseless rain of clothyard shafts veered round like a changing gust of wind and drifted into the faces of the charging cavaliers. Shot with matchless strength and precision, those awful English arrows pierced through shield and corslet and casque of all but armour of proof, and men and horses went down in swathes under the pelting storm and rolled over each other in awful confusion.

The onset was broken, checked; and, leaping their chargers on to dry land the English knights and men-at-arms set their lances in rest and swept forward to complete the havoc the archers had begun. In amongst the shattered, reeling squadrons they burst, impaling the panic-stricken Frenchmen on their long lances, then discarding these encumbered and cumbrous weapons, taking to battle-axe, sword, and mace, and in the one rush, overriding, scattering the flower of Godemar de Faye's force in irretrievable, hopeless flight.

Geoffrey Halford and Reginald Mortloe did not take part in that glorious charge, being with the first division, but Rupert de Mowbray was in it, charging by his father's side. The crossing of the rest of the little English army completed the destruction of the foe in front, who were pursued to a distance on the plain. Such was the famous passage of the ford of Blanchetaque or Blanchetache, which means, in English, the White Spot.

'We have but crossed in the nick of time, Geoff,' said his fellow-squire, as they rode behind the prince across the foughten field, and glanced back over their shoulders. 'The last man of the rearguard is just wading over and the tide takes him almost up to his neck, and yonder cometh the van of Philip de Valois' mighty host. It is foiled. The rising tide must prevent

its crossing after us. Oh, won't the French King and his nobles be in a rage? Won't they swear?'

Geoffrey laughed.

'I should say they would. They must have confidently counted on having us trapped, but they now know the force of the old saying, "There's many a slip 'twixt cup and lip."'

'Had his Majesty not been so prompt, resolute, and daring, we had been spent,' continued Mortloe, 'taken front and rear. Oh! our King is indeed a born soldier —a leader it does a man's heart good to be under.'

This passage of the Somme in the teeth of an almost equal force of the enemy, with another overwhelming host rapidly coming up, and cutting off all chance of retreat, was one of the most dashing achievements of that glorious campaign, and a fitting prelude to the crowning triumph which was shortly to come. Had King Edward failed to drive Godemar de Faye from his position, been repulsed or even held in check long enough to allow the pursuing French King to come up and join in the battle, nothing could have saved the English army, and Cressy's field would never have been fought.

The incensed Philip arrived at the ford, as it was, to find it impassable with the flood tide, and to witness, in impotent fury, bitter chagrin, and disappointed malice, the comparative handful of detested foemen he had fondly believed was at his mercy, tranquilly pursuing its march with Godemar's army flying in utter rout before it. The mocking, taunting shouts and jeering laughter of the English, as they went off in perfect security, must have made the baffled Frenchmen nearly beside themselves with vexation. Some of the knights and nobles, maddened beyond endurance, plunged into the tide and desperately strove to stem it, to wade, or swim their horses across and follow. But the animals were swept off their feet by the swift and swollen current, and, weighed down by all the iron panoply of themselves and their masters, were in danger of drowning with them and had to be lassoed and drawn back to terra firma.

By this fortunate and heroic enterprise, King Edward

obtained a breathing-space, and gained some ground, for Philip was obliged to go round and cross the flooded river by the Bridge of Abbeville. Halting at the Castle of Noyelle for the night, the English monarch dispatched detachments to burn Crotoi and other towns in the neighbourhood. Next day he arrived at the village of Cressy, or Crécy en Ponthieu, which is about a dozen miles north-east of Abbeville. Here, informed that Philip was once more close at hand in hot and vindictive pursuit, and perceiving the danger of continuing his march across the open plains of Picardy, thus exposing his rear to the onslaught of the numerous French cavalry, he formed the bold, apparently mad resolution of waiting for the enemy, of turning at bay, and venturing a general engagement.

XIV

ON CRESSY'S FIELD

The English pitched their camp on a gentle, grassy eminence, with a thick wood in their rear. On the flank were placed the baggage wagons, forming parks into which all the horses were driven. The sun was setting by the time these precautions had been taken, and King Edward summoned all his chief nobles and knights to a grand repast. He was in the gayest of spirits.

'My lords and gentlemen,' he said, as he sat at the head of the festive board, 'what think ye? Is it not high time we chastised the presumption of this usurper, Philip de Valois, who dares to hunt us from pillar to post in these our own realms by right of our royal mother's inheritance, who deemeth our march to join our Flemish friends and allies an ignoble flight before him? What say ye? Shall we not make our stand here and teach these swaggering, rebellious Frenchmen who is their rightful lord and suzerain, the impostor they have set up, or Edward of England, grandson of Philip IV?'

'For my part, I say make a stand, turn at bay by all means,' cried Sir John Chandos, with flashing eyes. 'It doth not become English gentlemen to run like frightened sheep before even overwhelming odds. Let us put our good right to this rebellious land to the ordeal of battle here and now, and let Heaven decide our claim.'

'Nobly spoken,' said the Earl of Warwick. 'Let us try the issue of a general engagement with this Philip de Valois, and God defend and vindicate the right!'

The other knights and nobles murmured their appro-

bation of these elevated sentiments, and with a gratified look, King Edward rose again and asked:

'Ye are all then in accord with me, we should give fight?'

'We are! we are!' shouted the enthusiastic throng. 'Long life to King Edward, rightful sovereign of France, and victory to our arms!'

'Your resolution, gentlemen, gives me a particular pleasure,' responded the monarch, with kindling eye, 'as I have now an opportunity, by one glorious action, if not of deciding my claim to the throne of France, at any rate of recovering the Earldom of Ponthieu, the inheritance of my grandmother, Queen Eleanor, of blessed memory. I shall not attempt to dissemble my supreme satisfaction at your decision, and, in the words of my Lord Warwick, God defend my right!'

The council of war broke up about midnight, and all retired to rest.

As the sun issued on the memorable 26th of August, the Black Prince was summoned to his father's presence.

'My gallant boy,' said the King, 'I am going to entrust to thee, young as thou art, the command in person of the first line, and hold back my own division in reserve, that thou mayst have all the honours of the day, prove thyself worthy of the honour of knighthood conferred upon thee, and win thy spurs in very truth. I will but order our defences, so as to teach thee the art of war.'

The army was drawn up on the hillside in three lines, the second of which was formed in such a way as to outflank the first and so prevent this being surrounded by the enemy. Trenches were dug along the front and sides of the position, and palisades set up within to form a strong defence against the charging squadrons of the justly dreaded French cavalry. All the baggage was then formed into a park behind in the forest, where another semi-circular trench was cut, so that the position was completely environed with entrenchments. The park of wagons was to form a last refuge and forlorn stand, if the army was forced in from its other defences.

'It will be a terrible fight,' said Geoffrey with pensive brow, 'a terrible and bloody struggle, of a certainty—a second Hastings, but I hope 'twill not witness a similar result.'

'Why, then,' laughed his fellow-squire, 'no matter how the day goeth, it must result the same as the battle thou mentionest, for here we are both the assailed, like the Saxons, and the invaders, like the Normans.'

The troops lay down in their ranks on the grass to rest and take their midday meal. A dead silence succeeded the late bustling, noisy preparations, quietude once more reigned over the smiling champaign landscape. Geoffrey, as he ate and drank amongst his fellow-squires, could hear the cattle lowing in the distant meadows, and the birds carolling gaily in the forest behind.

The time dragged on, and the King rode from rank to rank to animate the men. Bareheaded and with his jewelled warder in his hand, he addressed them close by where Geoffrey stood:

'My dear comrades in arms and faithful lieges—nay! nay! save your breath and lie down again, that ye may be fresh and vigorous at the enemy's approach! Let me point out to ye the necessity to which we are reduced. We must fight to-day, to conquer or to die. Certain destruction awaits ye an ye trust to anything but your own valour, and give the French an opportunity of wreaking that vengeance upon ye for which they pant. Our situation is desperate in the extreme; we are enclosed on all sides in an enemy's country; and we must win or perish. But I need not remind you how ye have hitherto proved your superiority over all the detachments of the French army that have fallen in your way, or to assure ye that the dispositions we have taken, our strongly entrenched position, will amply compensate for the great numbers of the enemy. I ask nothing more from ye, brave English hearts, this day, than to imitate my own example and enter this work with a blithe and confident soul, to follow and obey my son, whose safety I entrust to your stout arms and stouter courage.'

How the archers and men-at-arms, hardy, sun-

burnt, brawny fellows, cheered the Warrior King as he rode back to his own station, the famous windmill on the summit! Then, again, came a long silence, broken only by the hoof-beats of the horses ridden by the Black Prince and his retinue as he made a final inspection of the line.

Suddenly a great shout went up.

'They come! They come! St. George for Merrie England! Stand to it, English hearts!'

Geoffrey Halford, riding now behind his Prince, turned his eyes with the general gaze towards the horizon. It seemed a glittering sea of spears, stretching far to right and left. Wave on wave of dazzling, shimmering, molten steel as the August sun played over the mail-clad ranks, rolled ceaselessly like some mighty flood overspreading, engulfing the landscape. It seemed as if that inundation of molten metal must flow forward with resistless might, and swallow up the little army of Englishmen before it, as it was doing the country.

It was a fascinating spectacle, and Geoffrey with difficulty drew his eyes from it and looked on the prince, on whom the issue of the day must rest. The gallant youth had gone a shade paler, but not from any fear. Around him were the Earls of Warwick, Oxford, and Harcourt, the Lords Stafford, Chandos, Delaware, Cobham, and others of lesser note.

Philip de Valois' army had swelled to 120,000 men, and against this immense force was arrayed but 30,000 Englishmen at most. But the French had made a hasty march from Abbeville, believing they had the English at last cornered and at their mercy. In their heavy mail they were fatigued and disordered, hot and perspiring under the August sun. Four o'clock was chiming from the church clocks around as their first line, consisting of 15,000 Genoese cross-bowmen, advanced to the attack. At it did so a black thunder-cloud rolled up, and there fell a sudden, short, but heavy, drenching shower of rain, wetting and relaxing the strings of the crossbows. The weather cleared again almost immediately, but it had done its work, and when the Genoese, giving three loud shouts,

rushed to within bowshot and discharged their bolts in close and thick volleys, every one of these fell short of the English palisades.

Then loud laughed our own matchless archers, who had stood quite silent up to this, as they drew their good yew long-bows from the leather cases in which they had been preserved from the rain, and, bending them, let fly their arrows 'so wholly and so thick that it seemed to snow.' The pelting storm of grey-goose shafts threw the Genoese almost immediately into dire confusion. Raining down 'thick as motes in the sunbeam,' these deadly arrows wounded and slew hundreds every instant, mowed the helpless mercenaries of Philip down in swathes, piled the earth with dead and dying.

Geoffrey Halford looked away from that scene of pitiful slaughter, and glanced along the line of bowmen. He saw none shooting more steadily or 'wholly together,' as the phrase went, than the ex-free rangers of the fens. As one man, those hundred-and-eighty 'green-jackets' stepped forward one pace and drew their bowstrings to the ear like their centenar.

'See how well my whilom outlaws acquit themselves, my lords!' cried the Black Prince. 'By my halidom, my royal father and I are well repaid this day for our clemency to the lusty rogues!'

That hail of death was more than mortal men could endure. The Genoese broke and recoiled in inextricable disorder upon their second line—the heavily-mailed chivalry of France under the Count D'Alencon, brother of Philip de Valois. Enraged at their retreat and the momentary confusion into which they threw his own ranks, D'Alencon cried out: 'Slay the knaves! Cut them to pieces!' And the knights and men-at-arms fell upon the unfortunate, stampeding stumbling Genoese, rode and cut them down mercilessly. And still that rain of death went on ceaselessly from the English ranks, piercing to the hearts and brains of the mounted butchers, through helm and cuirass of tempered steel, as well as striking through the backplates of the shrieking, panic-stricken hireling foot.

The result was inevitable. The French horse and

infantry became mixed up, hopelessly entangled, and began to sway and reel and roll back upon the third line—that led by Philip himself.

'Now is your time to strike an effective blow!' cried Chandos. 'Order the Welsh and Irish levies out on them to take advantage of their embarrassment!'

The Black Prince gave the required order, and the shaggy-headed, half-armed kernes slipped out through the palisades, while the archers held their shot. Swooping down at a rush like kites upon the awful, entangled press of horse and cross-bowmen, they glided into it, and with their long knives slaughtered all who were unhorsed or had stumbled. They pounced upon the hapless French knight or squire rolling helplessly upon the ground in his heavy armour, and found the joints between his plates; they dived under the plunging chargers, disembowelling or hamstringing these, and bringing down the riders. D'Alencon, seeing in horror the effects of his brutal order, managed by desperate efforts to at last extricate his cavalry from the Genoese. Making a circuit, he swept forward in a grand charge to win the entrenchments.

'My gallant lords and gentlemen, now is our turn!' cried the Black Prince. 'The archers and kernes have done their duty right nobly. Let us do ours as well, and the day is won! Sound the charge!'

The bugles blared, and out from behind the palisades cantered the squadrons of English chivalry to meet the oncoming and outnumbering French horsemen. Geoffrey Halford, riding close behind the prince amongst the staff, drew down his visor and gripped his long lance determinedly, the while, in obedience to the command to trot, then gallop, he dashed his spurs into 'Silver Blaze's' flanks. Down the slope they thundered, while the Frenchmen galloped as furiously to the shock.

'St. George for England!' 'St. Denis for France!' resounded the war-cries. And almost before our young squire could realize it, there came a clap like a thunder-peal, a crash that seemed to blind the sight as well as deafen the hearing, and he found himself in a turmoil of leaping, rearing horses and lunging, slashing mail-clad human figures.

He himself rode straight at a French knight, who likewise singled him out. Their lances splintered on each other's shields; but he was nearly hurled from his saddle. Dazed by the shock, he had the presence of mind to toss away the useless truncheon of his broken lance and catch up the mace at his saddle-bow, as the foeman came round him with gleaming sword. He intercepted the stroke with his shield, and brought down the iron club upon the other's helmet, cracking it as it were a nutshell, and felling its rider like a stone to earth.

But barely had he time to recover the use of the weapon when two more Frenchmen dashed at him with couched lances. He made 'Silver Blaze' curvet, and evaded the thrust of one, and the long steel on the noble animal's chamfron ripped open the flank of the foeman's steed as it swept past. But Geoffrey could not save himself from the onset of his second adversary, though he managed in a measure to knock the lance up with his shield. The weapon caught him upon the crest of his casque. He felt a terrific blow; lights of every shade danced before his eyes, and a ringing noise filled his ears—then he knew no more.

XV

HOW CRESSY WAS LOST AND WON

When Geoffrey Halford opened his eyes, he found he was lying on the greensward back behind the palisades again, with his helmet off, and his brother-squire, Reginald Mortloe, and Lancelot Arveley bending anxiously over him.

'Ah! Thou hast come round at last, Geoff,' said Mortloe. 'How feelest thou? Take a drink of water.'

Arveley held a beaker to his lips, and our hero took a long draught of its refreshing contents.

'My head aches dreadfully and is ringing like a bell,' he answered then. 'But the battle is still going on. How goes it?'

'Well for us, old lad, though the fortune of the day still wavers. We should have been over-matched had not our second line come to our support, and enabled us to retire within the palisades. But I must hurry back to the side of the prince. Canst mount thy charger again?'

'Yea. I am almost myself once more. But tell me, prithee, who brought me out of the press. Was it thou, old friend?'

'It was Rex who saved thee, Geoff,' said Arveley.

'Aye, I saw thee fall, and managed to throw thee across "Silver Blaze's" back and bring thee out of the *mêlée*. But I take no credit for it, Geoff. The ground was cleared around thee, and so permitted me.'

'I owe thee my life, Rex. I will not forget the service. Now, if thou wilt give me a leg up, I will ride back with thee to the prince's side.'

Mortloe and Arveley helped him to mount, and they cantered over to where the Prince of Wales and his staff stood, breathing their horses in front of their blooded

squadrons, and preparing for another charge upon D'Alencon, who had retired a distance to redress his own disordered and sadly-thinned troops. As they rode up, the Earl of Warwick signed to Geoffrey to approach him. Wondering, the young man did so, when the earl whispered :

'Betake thyself full speed to his Majesty, master squire, and entreat him to dispatch us succour. Tell him that on the advance of the third line of the enemy we must be taken in front and flank, that their second line has already broken down the palisades on the flank of the archers, and was only driven back by our most desperate efforts.'

Geoffrey wheeled his horse and galloped up the hill to the rear. He reached the third division, which was posted on the brow of the hill. Sir Eustace de Mowbray was second in command under the King. Geoffrey saw the Lord of Hunstanton and the rest of the staff in advance of the line, anxiously surveying the progress of the fight, but the King was not visible.

'I bear a message from Lord Warwick to his Majesty,' he cried, as he rode up to the group. 'He is not here. Where will I find him?'

'In yonder windmill,' replied Sir Eustace, indicating a corn-mill near by on a swell on the right.

As Geoffrey rode along the line towards it, he saw Rupert with visor up, standing lance in hand against his horse's side, in front of the Hunstanton men-at-arms.

'How goes the battle, sir squire?' called the young knight, much to our hero's surprise.

'Indifferent well,' he replied, as he rode by. 'The enemy's first line is overthrown, but the prince is hard beset.'

At the door of the mill stood the King's charger impatiently pawing the ground.

'A message for his Majesty!' cried Geoffrey to the guard, and, dismounting, he was admitted and conducted up the winding stair to the topmost floor of the granary, where, attended only by two or three knights and Barnaby the jester, he found King Edward alternately watching the battle from the window and laughing at the antics and remarks of his paid fool.

Geoffrey knelt and delivered his message.

'Is my son dead or hurted, or on the earth felled?' was the famous royal query, made with the utmost composure.

'No, sire,' replied Geoffrey, 'but he is over-matched and hath need of your aid, my Lord Warwick bade me tell you.'

'Return to my son,' said the King, with a wave of the hand, 'and tell him that I reserve the honour of the day for his bravery. I am confident he will show himself worthy of the honour of that knighthood which I so lately conferred upon him. I shall not intermeddle. Let my boy win his spurs by his own valour.'

Geoffrey bowed and withdrew, and galloped back to the battle-front.

'Well, what said our lord the King, Geoffrey?' inquired the Black Prince, turning with a smile towards him as he rode up.

The squire repeated word for word what the King had said, and the prince turned to Warwick and said, in tones thrilling with filial pride:

'Ye have heard, my lord—all my lords and gentlemen? His Majesty leaves the battle to be decided by our unaided valour. He saith I must win my spurs, and, with Heaven's help and yours, I will do so. We will attempt another charge. Close the ranks!'

D'Alencon had been hurling his mailed squadrons again and again upon the English front, but under the ceaseless rain of arrows even those splendid, well-armoured horsemen could not press on. They crumbled away like snow in thaw, giving back in disorder every time before the murderous blast, leaving the whole plain in front of the English line piled high with a rampart of dead and dying. Proud baron, gallant knight, faithful vassal, princeling, and serf, lay there, placed by remorseless fate on the same level, 'in one red burial blent.'

And now as the shattered, demoralized Frenchmen formed up once more for another desperate effort to win those impregnable entrenchments, our English chivalry again rode forth to meet them. Geoffrey Halford was himself once more, and was gripping his lance as firmly as before, as they raced down the slope and crashed a

second time into the halting, sun-dazzled legions of Philip. Reginald Mortloe rode at his right hand and the prince was well in front.

This time so dense was the throng Geoffrey could not put his lance in rest, but there was no need. Those before him did the grim work, burst impetuously through the despairing, blinded foe, leaving it but for him and the others behind to follow and retrieve any misfortunes. There were none. D'Alencon was overborne by this charge, himself slain, and presently a great space opened out before the amazed eyes of the two young squires, with foes and friends scouring away in every direction. The flower of the French army, their boasted chivalry, was scattered like chaff before the wind.

But the day was not yet won. Philip of France advanced in person with the rear—the spear-men and billmen—to avenge his brother's fall and yet retrieve the ruin if possible. He could not.

'Let the whole line advance,' ordered the Black Prince, hoarse with joy and anticipated triumph. And the archers—Dickon o' the Fens running a good dozen yards in front of his 'green jackets,' themselves well in advance of all their fellow-bowmen—rushed forward, plying their dreaded 'white bows' with might and main.

The French billmen and spearmen came on like roaring, angry waves, in serried, dense array, to achieve what the Genoese and the pride of their country—the knights and nobles—had failed to do. As the English clothyard arrows drifted in their faces and swept away rank after rank, they set their teeth grimly, howled and yelled with despairing rage, and struggled on in the blighting storm in spite of it. On they rolled, leaving an awful track of dead and dying.

'But yon rabble of ill-armed hinds interposes between us and complete triumph!' cried the Black Prince. 'Upon them, gentlemen—follow me! Victory! Victory!'

Forward the English lances swept again to the onslaught. They fell like an avalanche upon the disheartened French spears and bills, amid whom stood Philip on foot, his horse having been killed under him by an English arrow. The carnage was now horrible in the extreme. Mounted and sheathed in mail of proof,

the English knights and men-at-arms had it all their own way. Bursting in amongst their ill-armed foes, they cut these down like ripe corn, engulfing or scattering the few remaining French lances that struggled to stem their all-conquering path.

Geoffrey Halford, with lance unused, followed his prince and comrades into the thick of the press. A burly French hind hewed at the youth with a pole-axe, while another who had feigned death and crept under a heap of slain, letting the first ranks of the English horse ride over him, sprang up with a long knife in his hand, and, seizing 'Silver Blaze' by the martingale, strove to plunge the blade into the noble creature's chest. But the sudden leap made the horse rear up in alarm. The pole-axe missed its mark, and the second fellow, carried off his feet and shaken from his hold, had his brains dashed out by the charger's iron-shod hoof.

Geoffrey turned in his saddle to see the rest of the foe fleeing on all sides. Cressy's field was won. All the mighty host of France lay either dead or wounded on that fateful field or had crumbled away in wild, disordered flight. Only a few gallant little bands of desperate men —proud princes, peers, and knights, mad with shame and rage, disdaining to fly—continued to hold out, to try to stem the tide of defeat.

But these smouldering embers of courage and despair were trampled under foot, swept swiftly away by the hurrahing, exultant English, who spread over the field in hot and bloodthirsty pursuit of their flying adversaries.

Geoffrey Halford could scarcely believe they had triumphed, as he turned his eyes about him. It seemed incredible that the vast sea of living steel that had been so lately surging against the palisades back in his rear could be beaten, fleeing before the small handful of men that had held those defences. And yet there was the evidence of his senses—the awful litter of corpses around, the swarms of yelling men tearing away like hounds released from the leash to all the points of the compass, either in frantic endeavour to save themselves or in ferocious, victory-flushed pursuit. The shades of evening were closing thickly over the dreadful

Golgotha, throwing their kindly protecting screen between the fugitives and the exultant, merciless conquerors.

'Hurrah! Hurrah, Geoffrey!' roared the voice of Mortloe; and he rode up to our hero's side with his whole face, uncovered by the visor, alight with the very intoxication of joy; 'we have triumphed—triumphed everywhere—utterly, completely. Was ever victory greater?'

'It is indeed a splendid victory, Rex, but I fear it hath been dearly bought.'

'Not so—not so! Look around thee! Where seest thou one Englishman down amid all these heaps of slain and dying? It is a triumph unparalleled in the annals of history. Pharaoh's host is scattered to the winds, and we can have suffered scarcely any loss. Yonder rides the staff. How proud the prince looketh; and well he may—well may he! Let us join him, and hear what words of praise his royal father hath for him.'

They rode over to where the gallant young prince sat his horse, receiving the enthusiastic congratulations of his officers with a transfigured beaming countenance.

Rupert de Mowbray galloped up from the camp. Sir Rupert now he was, by right of the King's own accolade, like the prince, on the wet sands of La Hogue.

'Sweet your Grace, your royal father waiteth your speedy return to camp that he may embrace you for your glorious achievement.'

'I haste to my noble father's arms. Happy son am I this eventide. Gentlemen, this day of Cressy will ring for all time in England's history.'

Back the laughing, exultant train rode, past the halted ranks of Northampton and Arundel, who cheered madly and tossed their iron-pots upon spear and bow, and danced and capered in enthusiastic joy and admiration of the gallant young prince.

Sir Rupert de Mowbray fell in beside Geoffrey and Mortloe. There was a disgusted look upon his face.

'How I envy ye who fought and charged in the battle-front!' he said. 'I have been eating out my heart in enforced inaction, while ye have been covering yourselves with glory.'

'Nay, Sir Rupert, envy not what I have done,'

replied Geoffrey, with a pleased look at the other's veiled overture of friendship, 'for 'twas little enow, i' faith. I was but in two of the charges and rode behind others, who did all the work. And then the foe were broken, disordered for us by the bow. 'Tis to the grand old English long-bow, and the stout yeomen behind it, before all our lances and swords, this day's great victory is due. Say I not sooth, Rex?'

'Aye! The fight was the bowmen's undoubtedly,' agreed Mortloe. 'We chevaliers but followed up their successes. The flower of Philip's host, his splendid chivalry, could not reach our palisades with the ceaseless hail of arrows showered upon them by our archers. Oh, it was dreadful to see so many gallant knights and noble chargers go down before that pelting rain of death. Thou wert unconscious during that part of the fight, Geoff. On it hung the whole issue of the battle. Had D'Alencon and his mailed squadrons only been able to win through that storm of feathered shafts this day hath told a different tale, mayhap. We knights and esquires, certes, could have availed nothing against their overwhelming odds. But as it was they never got within six score yards of the palisades. Oh, it was sickening, as I saith, to see the slaughter amongst them, such noble gentlemen! Their bodies and the bodies of their horses were piled in a great rampart all along our front and flank, forming a barrier which impeded, tripped up, and checked the squadrons behind.'

'Here comes the King!' interrupted Geoffrey.

The great Edward was on foot, and without his helmet. He was attended by the lords of Hunstanton, Mortimer, Dugworth, and others who had led the rear division. Throwing wide his arms, he came running forward, crying: 'Come to my heart, my gallant lad! Come to my heart!'

The Black Prince threw himself from the saddle and rushed into those open arms; and father and son embraced tenderly and kissed, the former crying aloud:

'Sweet son, God give you good perseverance in the course you have so gloriously begun. You are indeed my son, for most loyally have you acquitted yourself this day. You have shown yourself worthy of Empire!'

XVI

HOW THE 'GREEN JACKETS' HELD REVEL, AND THE PRINCE OF WALES' FEATHERS WERE INSTITUTED

Some historians have partly ascribed the victory at Cressy to five pieces of small cannon which Edward planted in his front, and which, by belching forth a storm of stones upon the entangled masses of the French, spread terror and dismay through their body; but this is on the unsupported testimony of John Vildano, a Florentine, who wrote nearly a century after. Froissart, however, does not mention their use, and as he is too fond of describing the minutest incidents to have omitted one so remarkable, we are inclined to believe they were not used in the battle. Besides, as some writers assert that artillery was known in France in 1338, eight years before, and Hume states that Philip had cannon, but in his haste left it behind at Abbeville, we cannot suppose the English use of the five pieces accredited to them would have caused such dire alarm, and prefer to think that the victory was due to the deadly hail of the bowmen's feathered shafts and the skill with which Edward had disposed his small force. Edward certainly, however, made use of guns at the Siege of Calais, and so the era may be regarded as that of one of the most important discoveries yet made, a discovery which changed by degrees the whole military science.

Geoffrey Halford and Reginald Mortloe, after waiting on the Black Prince and seeing him to bed, were seeking their own tent when they were met at its door by a lusty fellow in the green jacket of the Archers of the Fens.

'An it please ye, fair sirs,' the man said, doffing his plumed cap and saluting respectfully, 'Dickon o' the Fens and all his company would esteem it a great favour, an ye honoured them at their carouse round their watch-fires with your presence. He bade me tell thee, Master Halford, that he would fain hear again thy trouvere lay in praise of the English archers who have so well this day justified their reputation; that the lilt hath been running in his head ever since he first heard it, and he would dearly like to get the right hang of it, as well as his men to hear it.'

Geoffrey laughed and turned to Mortloe.

'What sayest thou, Rex? Shall we join the archers at their revels? By my fey, they proved themselves worth all our vaunted chivalry this day, as thou thyself saith. Methinks we ought to oblige them if only to show our appreciation and gratitude.'

'Thou'rt right, Geoff! 'Twill not be bemeaning ourselves, for after such a triumph as this, all Englishmen may be brothers, hail-fellow-well-met, and break down the barriers of social difference for one night, at least. And this song of thine! I should like to hear it also. Thou hast often promised to let me hear it, and there could not be a more fitting occasion than this. Come, we will gratify the stout knaves. Tell the centenar, bowman, we will be with him and his company anon.'

King Edward could not wholly believe that the mighty host of Philip was totally disrupted, irretrievably routed. He feared that a portion of it might rally and return, thirsting for vengeance, again to try conclusions with the small force of their conquerors; and so he had ordered a vigilant watch to be kept and the soldiers to lie around their camp-fires under arms, ready for any emergency. Nevertheless the men were carousing in the gayest of spirits, and the whole camp rang with sounds of revelry.

A mighty cheer from the outskirts of the host which the Rangers of the Fens occupied aroused their centenar of the coming of Geoffrey and his fellow-squire. Dickon was seated astride a runlet of sack, waving a leather tankard above his head, and, heedless of the fact, he was tipping forth its sparkling contents upon himself or the ground at every flourish, while he trolled forth, in no

bad voice, a lilt of the merry greenwood shaws of Old England.

Around him reclined, either on the bare ground or on trusses of straw, some thirty or forty of his men, all in their steel brigandines, and with their white war-bows beside them, side by side with black-jacks of beer or stoups of wine. A man was drawing off cup after cup of the sack from the venthole, and handing them round, while two or three more were dipping rapidly emptied jacks into a hogshead alongside, with its end knocked in. At that heralding shout, however, the centenar sprang off the runlet and roared:

'Here he comes! Up with you, all! Up, ye swilling knaves, and greet him with a rousing cheer, the gallant lad who made us free men, who obtained us the right to live and die like Englishmen, instead of as hunted outlaws, without whose noble intercession we had not seen this glorious day! There he be! Give him three cheers. Hip-hip-hurrah!'

'Hurrah! hurrah! hurrah!' shouted the ex-outlaws in the greatest enthusiasm, drenching each other with the ale and wine as they flourished their jacks over their heads, and waved them wildly to and fro.

Dickon himself threw down his tankard and rushed forward with outstretched hands to meet Geoffrey. He caught the laughing young fellow's two hands and almost wrung them off; then led him up to the seat of honour, the runlet he himself had just vacated.

'Master Halford, this is an honour thou hast conferred on us, and I am right glad of the opportunity of thanking thee personally for the great service thou didst render to me and these stout fellows round. But we can never—never wholly repay the great and lasting debt we are under to you. Three more cheers, lads, for the noble young squire. May he soon be wearing the golden spurs of knighthood of which he is so worthy, young as he is!'

Again the cheers were given with a will, while our hero in vain motioned for them to have done.

'Nay, nay, men,' he said, when silence once more reigned, 'an I were his noble young Grace, the victor of to-day, I doubt if ye could show me more honour. I

am deeply sensible of your gratitude, but ha' done. I beg of ye to continue your revelry and pay no further heed to my fellow-squire and me.'

'That may not be, Master Halford. Thou must rule it at our revels to-night,' returned Dickon. 'Thou hast agreed, my messenger informed me, to sing us that ballad thou wottest of. To it and to thee, under the prince's favour, do I account myself a free soldier of the King's at this hour. Come, noble sir, favour us with the lilt an it please thee. Though, maybe, thou wouldst first prefer to wet thy whistle. Here, Wat Baker! a couple of goblets of the sack for our distinguished guests. Pass in your pots again, my lads all! We must drink the health of our young guest.'

'Nay nay, no wine for me, good friend Dickon, until I have sung my song and earned it,' cried Geoffrey.

He had his cittern slung upon his back. He slewed it round and tinkled the strings.

'Attention!' bellowed Dickon. 'Cease your row, ye disrespectful knaves! Silence for Master Halford's song. Stow filling these jacks until he ha' done, Will Hazelton and Tom Fletcher.'

Amid a deep hush, Geoffrey sang his little ballad. By the time he got to the fourth verse, Dickon and many of the others had caught the refrain with more or less accuracy and were accompanying him, *sotto voce,* in all sorts and conditions of voices. And when he had finished, and the storm of applause the effort called forth had ceased, the ex-outlaw chief took up the measure and roared out, beating time with his bow, to much dodging and ducking of those in his immediate vicinity in order to escape a swipe:

> The bow must be full six feet long,
> The shaft a clothyard, trim and strong,
> And the bowman a yeoman,
> An English archer, lads,
> To speed the good shafts fast and sure,
> The shafts with the grey-goose ends.

'Ah, that's not right. That doesn't rhyme,' he laughed. 'Where was I at fault, prithee, good Master Halford?'

'The rhyme is "friends" and "ends," smiled Geoffrey, amid a roar of merriment from the archers. 'But I must compliment thee, Dickon, on thy excellent memory, natheless. The rest of the words of the verse and the tune were right well remembered.'

'Aye, I have a good memory, save for tavern scores, Master Halford, and with them I must say my memory always failed me.'

'I warrant me, though, thou rememberest where thou gottest thy best ale and sack, e'en an you forgot your debts,' laughed Mortloe.

It was late before the two young squires could tear themselves away from the convivial company, and seek their couches. With the morning's light, nevertheless, they were up and waiting upon their royal lord.

'Brace me up with all speed,' said his noble young Grace. 'I am all eagerness to join my father and ride over the battle-field. The heralds are learning how many of the enemy fell. We have achieved a crowning triumph. There is no doubt Philip of France's great host is scattered to the four winds of heaven and that we have nothing further to fear from it. Can you give a guess now what our loss was?'

'Nay, your Grace,' replied Geoffrey. 'I have no idea, save that it was exceedingly small, that it must have been, for I saw not one of ours go down.'

'But three knights, one esquire, and some fifty common men,' said the prince. 'Oh, it is wonderful—miraculous, and thousands on thousands of the French must have fallen, for their bodies are piled in swathes upon the plain beyond our trenches.'

Geoffrey and Mortloe had soon screwed and braced him up in his famous suit of black armour, and then they attended him on horseback to the King's pavilion. The meeting between father and son was as affectionate as the night before, and together the royal pair cantered with their retinue out to where that dreadful litter of piled-up corpses marked the scene of the fateful struggle. At the gate of the palisades they were met by the heralds.

'Well, how compute ye the enemy's loss?' demanded King Edward of these.

'O sire, terrible indeed has been the slaughter amongst

them. Here are the lists. Eleven princes have fallen, Charles, King of Bohemia, James, King of Majorca, Ralph, Duke of Lorraine, the Counts of Alencon, Flanders, Blois, Vaudemont, Arcourt, Aumale, St. Pol, and Bourbon; four and twenty barons; 1,200 knights; fifteen hundred gentlemen, four thousand men-at-arms, and about thirty thousand infantry. Eighty standards have been taken. Yonder they stand displayed!'

Geoffrey turned, with all about him, to view the captured banners which had been planted in long array on the hillside.

'Whose be yon standard?' asked the Black Prince, pointing to a beautiful one embroidered in gold, charged with three ostrich feathers and bearing the motto, '*Ich Dien*' (I serve). 'I know it not.'

'It is that of the King of Bohemia, Charles of Luxembourg, your Grace.'

'And he hath fallen, thou sayest? Was he not an old man and blind?'

'He was, your Grace. Natheless, he fell valiantly. Some of the prisoners we have taken and who await your orders, sire, say that he besought those around him to lead him into the thick of the fight, when he heard they were being defeated, and that two of his knights thereupon tied their horses' bridles to his, and in that manner charged into the press. And the prisoners do not lie, your Grace, for we found their three bodies where the fight raged thickest with their horses tied together standing by them.'

'Now, by my faith,' cried the noble young scion of royalty, 'such courage and devotion deserve to be remembered through all time by some fitting memorial. I would desire no fairer fate myself than to die as this heroic old blind warrior did, face to the foe and linked in death with true and faithful hearts. Happy should I be, if I could have such an ending. Lead us, heralds, to the spot where this brave old king lies. Ye have not disturbed the body?'

'We have not, your Grace.'

'Then guide us to the spot,' said the King.

Through the awful heaps of slain men and horses, across that terrible Aceldama the party rode, the horses

stepping with all the noble instinct of their kind gingerly, to prevent treading on the numerous sprawling limbs across their path that would never quicken again with life. Geoffrey Halford felt sick at the sight of the dreadful carnage that had been inflicted, his heart bled at the piteous groans and prayers for water that resounded on all sides. But there was no need for him to turn aside to minister to the poor wounded wretches he thus heard imploring. Bands of English archers and men-at-arms were already ranging over the field with flasks of water and wine and rolls of lint, doing all they could to undo the havoc they had wrought the previous day.

At last the royal train stood beside the noble dead it sought. There lay the fierce, dauntless old warrior, still girt in his iron plate. A broken fragment of a lance was buried in his breast, and beside his nerveless hand lay the bloodless sword he had struck the desired but random stroke with. His helmet had been removed and lay beside him, with the triple ostrich plume on the crest surmounting the crown of gold he wore to betoken his dignity. Close beside him, almost hacked to pieces, lay the two knights who had proved their fidelity unto death. The horses of the three, however, had been led away as the prizes of the finders.

The Black Prince sprang from his saddle, and, kneeling down beside the corpse of the old monarch, took up the helmet of the dead and plucked the triple plume from it.

'In remembrance of this brave old man and our unrivalled victory, I take this crest of three ostrich feathers, and the motto, "*Ich Dien*," for my own, and I trust it will ever be the crest of the Prince of Wales,' he cried.

'My noble son,' said the King, 'your conduct endears you more and more to me. I am indeed proud of my chivalrous boy, who knows how to respect and admire courage in a foe, as well as to meet him.'

Riding back to the camp, the King dispatched a detachment of two thousand archers on horseback with five hundred lances to scour the adjacent country. He treated the killed and wounded with great humanity.

A three days' truce was proclaimed, and the bloody field was consecrated for the burial of the slain. The body of the King of Bohemia was sent to his family, and Edward and the Black Prince, clad in funeral habit, attended the funeral of the slain French nobility.

XVII

BEFORE CALAIS

King Edward was not so elated over his victory of Cressy as to imagine France was totally conquered, and lay helpless at his feet. He seemed rather to realize the immensity of the task he had set himself, and he prudently decided to confine his ambition for the nonce to securing an easy entrance at all times into the kingdom—a port from which he could extend his operations at leisure. Calais was the place he pitched upon, and thither accordingly he marched his victorious army five days after Cressy.

The town was most strongly fortified. It was completely environed on the land side by a high wall, built by Philip, Count of Boulogne, in 1228, and was occupied by a large garrison under a resolute and courageous governor, Sir John de Vienne. King Edward, considering it would be vain to attempt to gain the place by storm, determined to reduce it by famine. His fleet was brought up, and blockaded the harbour; while he invested the town closely by land, setting his army to form a vast circumvallation of entrenchments. The soldiers were housed in huts, thatched with broom or straw, and laid out in streets. The French, confident of their security, laughingly termed the besieging camp 'the city of wood.'

'Certes, his Majesty means to take things very easily,' quoth Mortloe to Geoffrey Halford. 'Dost know he has established a regular market, where flesh and fish and all other sorts of merchandise will be on sale every Wednesday and Saturday?'

'I had not heard,' Geoffrey answered; 'but I am not surprised. He is evidently determined to remain here indefinitely, but he will reduce the town.'

Weeks went by, and the hot-headed young knights and squires in the camp began to indulge in discontented murmurs against the 'inglorious inaction' of such a siege. So to appease them, the King made a show of pressing the beleaguered. He ordered the gates and walls to be bombarded with springals, trebuchets, and other military engines of the period for hurling huge stones, as well as the five guns he possessed. These last were of a 'very clumsy and inconvenient make, being formed of several pieces of iron, fitted together lengthwise, and then hooped with iron rings.' They were of enormous bore, as they only fired stones of prodigious weight like the other machines. Mounted on wheel-less wooden stands, they were difficult to manipulate, and an idea of the small faith Edward had in them as aids to the fulfilment of his hopes may be gathered from the fact that the only allowance of powder made them for the siege was three pounds a day with ten cannon shot.

The archers advanced to the assault, screened by great shields called pavises, six feet in length and broad enough to cover the bowman himself and a bill-man who bore the protection. Raining down showers of clothyard shafts upon the French manning the battlements, they covered the great mass of the billmen and dismounted men-at-arms, who rushed forward with scaling ladders, and planted these against the walls.

But the garrison, erecting wooden sheds along the battlements to shield themselves from the deadly hail of arrows, replied to the assault with volleys of cross-bow bolts, and threw down stones upon the ladders, smashing these, as well as poured boiling pitch, oil, and quicklime upon the devoted heads of the swarming assailants. The latter were forced to retreat to the shelter of their entrenchments.

'Ye see, gentlemen, the folly of thinking to capture the place by storm,' said the King then. 'We had much better have patience, and leave the garrison to the results of time and starvation.'

Nevertheless, he resorted to the use of the 'sow'—a movable covered shed—which was pushed up against the wall of the town, when sappers, concealed within,

attacked the masonry with pick and lever and spade, striving to undermine it and effect a breach. By Sir John de Vienne's order, the garrison levered huge red-hot stones and a great mass of flaming combustibles over upon it, setting it on fire, and nearly destroying all working within. Belfries also, or great towers on wheels, manned with archers, were pushed forward to sweep the battlements with arrows and gain a footing upon them with wooden gangways, or bridges dropped from their roofs. The French met these expedients with showers of mighty pieces of rock that shattered them, and showers of flaming arrows that likewise set them on fire.

Geoffrey Halford, Mortloe, and three or four other young squires were seated around one of the camp-fires the night of the failure of the assault, discussing it.

'It reminds me of the time when the Earl of Salisbury besieged "Black Agnes" in the Castle of Dunbar,' remarked one, who was the oldest of the party.

'Tell us of it, Mandeville. Thou wert present, a page at the time,' said two of the others.

'Yea, I was but eleven—'tis nine years agone—but I had accompanied my lord, good Sir John Copeland, to the field. "Black Agnes"—she was so called from her dark complexion—was the daughter of Randolph of Scottish note and wife of the Earl of March. She held the castle right valiantly against us, though we blockaded it by sea and land. When the stones from our engines fell within her walls, she ordered her maidens with white napkins to wipe away the dust within sight of us in derision, and she nearly captured the Earl of Salisbury himself by a clever stratagem. She persuaded one of her soldiers to pretend to betray the fortress. Believing in the fellow's treachery, the Earl went up to the gate, which was left open with the portcullis up. As luck had it, my lord, brave old Sir John, pressed across the drawbridge before his leader, and entered first. The portcullis was immediately lowered, and Sir John was taken prisoner; while the earl and the others only got back off the bridge in time to prevent being all hurled into the moat when it was pulled up. The earl was riding near the walls

later, when a knight was shot dead by an arrow from the battlements beside him. "There goes one of my lady's tirepins!" exclaimed Salisbury. "The countess's love-shafts pierce to the heart."'

'And how ended the siege?' asked Geoffrey. 'Did the chivalrous earl capture the war-like dame at the finish?'

'Nay,' replied the other. 'We reduced the garrison almost to the verge of extremity; but Sir Alexander Ramsay, a valiant Scottish knight, with only forty resolute men, ran the blockade, got in with a small vessel filled with provisions, passing on a dark night through the heart of our fleet, and revictualled the stronghold. Then her ladyship was animated to make a sudden and vigorous sally upon us, and we raised the siege and cleared out.'

'Hullo, whom have we here?" exclaimed yet another of the party as a knot of young gallants, like themselves, in plumed cap and silk attire, appeared from the shadows and came hurrying up. At the head of the new-comers stalked the newly-fledged knight, Sir Rupert de Mowbray, with face white and distorted with a passion he was evidently striving his utmost to keep within bounds. At sight of his countenance Geoffrey, Mortloe, and their companions, rose to their feet in astonishment.

'What is the matter? What's wrong, Sir Rupert?' demanded Mortloe.

Rupert strode up to Geoffrey with blazing eyes and alternately clenching and unclenching his right hand.

'My quarrel is with thee, Geoffrey Halford,' he cried in tones that were almost choked with the rage that consumed him.

And so saying, he slashed Geoffrey savagely across the face with his leather glove, snatched from his left hand. The squire reeled, and his fine young face went whiter even than his insulter's. Mortloe and all the others round uttered ejaculations of horrified surprise, and the squires and pages who had been following Rupert came rushing up and crowded eagerly round.

'Rupert de Mowbray, you have struck me without cause or reason.' Geoffrey began to speak hotly when

the young knight interrupted him with uncontrollable fury.

'Without cause or reason! Call it no cause—call it no reason to defame the noble Lady Sybil Penthony, who hath no brother or father here to defend her good name? Vile hound, hast thou not spirit enow even to resent the blow I have given thee? Must I then chastise you like the cur you are with the flat of my sword till you howl for mercy?'

And the infuriated young fellow clapped his hand upon his sword hilt.

'I will not fight thee, Sir Rupert de Mowbray,' replied Geoffrey, controlling himself with a desperate effort. 'Thou art carried away with anger and know not what thou doest. I defame the Lady Sybil! My tongue would rot before I would utter one word to her disadvantage.'

'Liar and coward! I do not know how to keep my hands off you. Can you with truth say aught to her disadvantage? Retract your vile slander this instant—this instant, I say, or as Heaven is to be my judge I will spit thee on my sword.'

And he clutched Geoffrey fiercely by the throat with one hand, while he whipped forth his sword with the other. But Geoffrey wrenched away his grasp, and Mortloe and several of the other squires, rushing forward, held Rupert's sword arm, wrested the weapon from him, and separated the pair.

'He must fight me—he must accept the challenge I have given him, or I will thrash him with my sword belt,' vociferated Rupert hoarsely. 'I will ram his lying words down his foul throat.'

'Are you mad, Sir Rupert, thus to force a quarrel on one who hath injured you in no way?' demanded Mortloe. 'I know Halford is incapable of what thou accusest him, slandering a lady's fair name. This must go no further, friends. Keep them apart!'

'Cyril Branscombe, thou didst hear the archers of my father's company discussing the slander. And thou also, Guy de Wilton, didst not? And I myself heard Barnaby, the King's jester, talking of it to Watkins, my father's man-at-arms. Is that not sufficient proof?'

'I repeat my tongue would rot before I would slander the fair fame of the lady thou mentionest, Rupert de Mowbray—yea, or any other lady,' retorted Geoffrey with calm dignity.

'Ask him to deny that he has the Lady Sybil's glove,' whispered Cyril Branscombe in the enraged young knight's ear, contriving to press close up to the latter.

Rupert glanced at the page, who shrank away as if expecting a blow.

'Say then before all here present thou didst not receive a glove from the damosel I speak of and so rebut the base calumny,' cried Rupert.

All turned to Geoffrey for his answer. But he remained silent, and furtively felt over his heart where, sewn inside his doublet, the little yellow kid gauntlet reposed.

'One gentleman hath struck another,' said one of the squires, 'and the recipient of the blow must avenge it and support his cause on the body of his challenger or he is not worthy of the name of a man, much less of a place among us.'

'I will be your second, Sir Rupert,' said Mandeville.

'Hold, sirs!' cried Mortloe. 'No duel can take place within the camp or it will go hard with us all as the abettors of brawling.'

'We can adjourn to the seashore to the right of the town. We shall be safe from interruption there, amongst the dunes,' said one youth.

The other squires crowded forward, crying:

'The matter must be settled by the ordeal of combat. A fair lady's good name is at stake. Sir Rupert has an honourable cause of quarrel. To the beach and settle the affair there.'

'I will not fight,' said Geoffrey. 'It will not mend or settle matters. Confront me with those who say I gave tongue to aught concerning the Lady Sybil.'

'You will have to fight, Geoff,' said Mortloe sadly. 'You have received a blow, and you may not let it pass without losing caste, and being cut by all as unworthy the spurs of a gentleman.'

'I care not.'

'Thou wilt be made to care. Thy life in camp will

not be worth the living. Thou hast been insulted, either rightly or wrongly it will matter not. All that will be considered will be that thou hast not the courage to resent the affront put upon thee. By every code of honour thou art bound to meet Sir Rupert in the duel. That there is no truth in the slander imputed to thee thou canst show later, after thou hast avenged the way thou hast been insulted.'

'Then I will meet him as he wishes, sith you put it that way.'

'He will fight—he will fight!' cried several of the pages round in high glee.

''Tis well,' called Rupert. 'To the seashore!'

Then all moved off in a body, passed hurriedly through the streets of the camp, and slipping by the sentinels without question, gained the deserted sandhills. It was a bright moonlight night, and the combatants would be well able to conduct their fierce sword-play.

'Let the duel be with sword and dagger,' said Mortloe, who constituted himself Geoffrey's second.

'As you wish,' replied Mandeville, the squire who supported Sir Rupert de Mowbray.

The combatants threw off their pourpoints or doublets, rolled up their shirt-sleeves, and drew their swords and poniards. All the others formed a wide ring around them, and speculated on the result. It seemed an unequal fight, for the young knight was two years older than his opponent, and taller and stouter, with a much longer reach in the arm. But those who had been present at the tourney at Rising Castle remembered what Geoffrey had done there, and doubted the issue of the strife. Sir Rupert, however, was a skilled young swordsman, while Geoffrey had done much to better his practice during the past four months by constant exercise with Mortloe and his fellow-squires.

'On guard! Go!' cried Mandeville.

The duellists advanced quickly upon each other. Their blades clashed, then circled like lightning round each other, as lunge, and parry, and cut followed in rapid succession. Sir Rupert was so carried away by his ungovernable rage, that he pressed the attack furiously, and Geoffrey, who had no wish to injure him, but was set

upon disarming him, if possible, was hard put to it to guard his savage thrusts and strokes. Geoffrey was forced to give ground. Now he only just managed to turn the point of his adversary's blade away from his heart with his dagger. Now he almost had his sword beaten out of his grasp by a tremendous downward cut that, had it fallen upon his head, would have cloven him to the chine.

The fury of his foe, the latter's evident desire to slay or grievously hurt him, roused all Geoffrey's ire at last, and he forgot everything but that the youth before him had wantonly insulted him. With heated face and flashing eyes, he also assumed the offensive, and met Rupert's onslaught with one as mad, driving the young knight back in turn. Surprised at this change of tactics, Rupert failed to quite ward off a thrust aimed at his shoulder, and Geoffrey's sword grazed his cheek, scratching it, and drawing forth the blood.

Rupert uttered a snarl like a wild beast, and, darting in on his opponent, with one trenchant downstroke of his sword cleft Geoffrey's, hastily raised on guard, in twain. The next instant the two young fellows had closed in a fierce wrestle, each gripping the other's dagger-wrist to prevent the use of that weapon, and Rupert trying to shorten his sword, and plunge it in the heart of his antagonist, who, in turn, seizing the hilt, attempted to twist or wrest it out of his grasp.

'Hold! hold!' cried the seconds and the others, rushing forward to drag the maddened pair apart. 'Drop it! The fight has gone far enough. Would ye kill one another?'

Struggling and resisting, the weapons were torn from their hands, and they were separated.

'Why have ye interfered?' demanded Sir Rupert, hoarse with baffled fury. 'Give him another sword and let the fight continue. He or I may not leave this spot alive.'

There was a rush of feet, and the next moment Geoffrey and his antagonist were in the hands of several stout fellows in the green jackets of the Archers of the Fens. Many of those around, too, including Mortloe and Mandeville, were seized. The others, twisting and dodging quickly, got away and fled off into the darkness.

Borne on the wind came the dull thudding of many horses' hoofs.

'We arrest ye for brawling in the name of his Grace, the prince,' cried the stentorian tones of Dickon o' the Fens; and he strode forward.

The honest fellow fell back with a gasp of horror and dismay at the sight of Geoffrey.

'Master Halford, thou in it!' he exclaimed hoarsely. 'This is certain disgrace for thee, an his Grace find thee here. Release them quick, lads! Away with thee, Master Halford, ere his Grace comes up.'

The archers released their prisoners, and the majority of them, the two seconds amongst the number, darted off and vanished in the shadows. But Geoffrey and Rupert had no time to follow their example, in the midst of the throng as the pair were, before the Black Prince, followed by Sir John Chandos and half a dozen other knights, rode up.

'So, Sir Rupert de Mowbray and Master Halford, ye can find no better occupation than brawling? A fine example this to set to other young hot-bloods of the camp, flying at one another's throats, seeking each other's death as though there were no Frenchmen left to fight,' exclaimed his Grace, glowering angrily upon them both. 'Ye are a disgrace to your respective ranks. What have ye to say for yourselves?'

The two young men hung their heads, but neither answered. Geoffrey would not vindicate himself at the expense of his antagonist, and preferred to be deemed equally in the wrong rather than that the Lady Sybil's fair name should be lightly mentioned by archer and man-at-arms round the camp-fires. The prince was aware of the cause of the quarrel, and respected the young fellows' reasons for silence, accordingly. He, however, still feigned the deepest resentment and frowned darkly, as he said:

'Ye shall both be confined to your tents for a week. I place ye under arrest as a lesson to all other would-be brawlers. Be not seen outside your tent-doors for the next week under pain of my heaviest displeasure. Centenar, see that a sentry be placed over them until the time of their detention is fulfilled.'

With that he wheeled round his horse and rode away.

Geoffrey looked at his still fuming adversary.

'Sir Rupert,' he said, sadly, 'believe me, thou art mistaken in thinking I uttered the slander. I will say no more, but hope that thou wilt shortly learn the truth and regret thy unseemly action.'

The young knight's only reply was a fierce scowl, as he turned on his heel and strode off.

'I am sorry indeed for this, Master Halford,' said Dickon o' the Fens as he accompanied our hero back to the camp. 'I trow well thou wert in no way to blame, but the prince's disfavour falleth most heavily on thee, for 'tis only by keeping in countenance with him thou canst look for promotion. Why did'st thou not justify thyself just now?'

'It would not have become me to do so, good Dickon. Thou dost not understand, honest friend, and I may not explain. And I merited his noble Grace's displeasure in suffering myself to be forced into the fight.'

In obedience to his orders, Dickon set one of his men outside the door of the young squire's tent, and then went off to do the same as regarded Rupert. Mortloe and Arveley came in to offer condolences.

'It's very rough on you, old man,' said his fellow-squire, 'and I must consider myself in a measure responsible, for 'twas I urged you to fight Sir Rupert.'

'Prithee say no more, Rex. Thou didst act as thou thoughtest best, and 'tis idle to indulge in vain regrets. We should all often enough think twice on a thing an we knew what was in store for us. 'Tis evident I have cowardly enemies who set this rumour afloat anent me, and I was a fool to play into their hands by accepting de Mowbray's challenge. I do not hold him to blame for this, for he acted but as thou and I might act, were a lady we respected slandered in our hearing. I cannot imagine who these secret enemies I have are. I might suspect Cyril Branscombe, had he known aught of the matter of the glove. But he was attendant on his Grace with thee at the time. Of course thou didst not mention the gift to any one, Lance?'

'As though I would,' replied Arveley, reproachfully.

Geoffrey found his durance anything but to his taste.

The days of his detention dragged by on leaden wings, though Mortloe and other young squires did their best by dropping in to spend a few hours with him from time to time to make them pass as pleasantly as possible. The week was almost up, when one dark night, as Geoffrey lay awake upon his pallet, he was startled by hearing a quick rush of feet outside the tent door, then a deep groan, and a heavy fall.

'Come on now, quick!' whispered a voice in French. 'Yonder is the King's pavilion, and beside it is his son's. One bold dash now and we may secure them both.'

Wild with alarm, Geoffrey Halford sprang from his bed, snatched his sword from where it hung, and flew to the door. Wrenching the flap from its lacings, he rushed forth, clad only in his night-shirt and forgetful of the prince's mandate in his startled horror, though he would have heeded it little in such a crisis. He stumbled over the lifeless, prostrate form of the sentry, and saw in the shadows a number of dark, mail-clad figures springing on horseback.

'Ho! the guard! The enemy is upon us! Bows and bills! Save the King and the prince!' yelled Geoffrey, unsheathing his blade in a flash, and dashing forward at top speed.

'*Peste!* We are discovered,' cried a voice in French. '*En avant!* Follow me! *Saint Ives! Saint Ives!*'

XVIII

HOW GEOFFREY FIRST MET BERTRAND DU GUESCLIN

The band of horsemen swept at a rush, though without an audible hoof-beat, towards the royal tent. The guard stationed there, with alarmed shouts seized their arms and threw themselves in the way of the daring invaders. All was instantly wild hubbub, the furious tumult of battle. Though almost completely surprised, and greatly outnumbered, the stout English men-at-arms met the onslaught of their mounted foes right valiantly, lunging at the horses' chests with their shortened pikes. But the invaders were too strong to be held in check even for an instant. They rode their handful of antagonists down and gained the royal pavilions. Springing from their horses they rushed inside, and dismayed shrieks, the clash of steel, and furious shouts in French issued forth in confused medley.

Geoffrey sped forward like the wind, a prey to the utmost consternation, while the whole 'City of Wood' resounded with alarmed cries, the thunder of galloping hoofs. Nobles and knights came rushing in their night attire from the tents around, men-at-arms and archers came tearing to the spot from all sides.

'The camp is surprised! A camisade!* A camisade! The enemy is in our midst, trying to carry off the King and the Prince of Wales! Help! help! Turn out! Turn out!'

Geoffrey rushed up to the door of the nearest tent—that of the Black Prince. A confused throng of mail-

* A night assault or surprise, in which the assailants wore their shirts over their armour so as to know one another.

clad knights and men-at-arms whom there was no knowing from friends, came tumbling forth with encrimsoned swords and battle-axes to regain their horses, some hewing back at the crowd of sewers and servants pressing on their heels and showering blows at them with camp-stools, jugs, cushions, the legs of tables, and all manner of tent furniture.

'*Mil diables!* We are cheated of our prey. Our quarry has slipped us!' roared a short, powerfully-built man of not more than twenty-six or twenty-seven, with the visor wide open, the last of the intruders to retreat. He spoke in French in a gruff, deep, lion-like voice with a strong Breton accent, and drove back the surging mob of vengeful domestics with a threatening sweep of his great two-handed sword. 'We can hope to achieve no more. To horse, comrades, and away!'

Singling this individual out as the leader of the adventurous band, Geoffrey leaped in his way.

'No so fast, Sir Frenchman! Yield thee!' he cried.

The young Breton uttered a growl like a wild beast.

'*Mort de ma vie!* Yield me to a stripling such as thou! Back! Out of my path, or I cleave thee to the middle!'

Geoffrey made a furious thrust at him, stung by his scorn. But the great two-handed sword described a swift circle in mid-air and descended upon the blade, cutting it clean in two. With a contemptuous laugh, the Breton sprang forward, caught Geoffrey by the shoulder and sent him spinning aside. The lad had time to observe that his conqueror had a most ugly, coarse-featured face, adorned with a very short and snub nose, and thick straight brows overhanging the fiercest, most fiery eyes.

'Take thy life, boy. It is not with such as thou Bertrand du Guesclin fights,' he cried, rushing to his horse and vaulting into the saddle with the utmost agility. Then yelling his war cry, 'Saint Ives! Saint Ives! Notre Dame du Guesclin!' he tore off at full speed after his companions.

Bertrand du Guesclin! Geoffrey Halford had never heard the name before. Its owner was as yet an undistinguished French squire, but it was to ring

through all Europe in less than a dozen years more—to be the hope and stay of his crushed and bleeding country. From his present obscurity its owner was to rise to the highest pinnacle of fame, and, as Constable of France and of Castile, to prove the saviour of his nation, and rival in knightly renown even our own Black Prince, who was to measure swords with him on the field of Navaretta, or Najaro.

Geoffrey Halford was to boast proudly in years to come of this first meeting with the great French hero. At the moment, however, he fell back in the deepest chagrin, gripping his broken and useless sword, and looked after the flying Frenchman with hot and bitter feelings. Turning to inquire of the frightened royal attendants as to his lord, he saw a knight in complete mail, with visor down, clearly trying to slink away round the tent in the confusion and disorder. A horse lay near kicking in its death-throes, with an English man-at-arms dead beside it, still gripping the pike he had thrust into its heart.

Geoffrey ran towards the fugitive, who, looking over his shoulder and seeing he was discovered, immediately dropped all further concealment and fled away at his fastest. But his heavy armour militated against anything like speed, and Geoffrey was up to him in next to no time.

'Surrender! Surrender!' shouted the young squire in French.

The stranger knight made a savage side-long cut at him with a long sword, but dodging the stroke, Geoffrey closed with him, dealing him at the same time a heavy blow upon the helmet with his broken brand. Reeling back, the Frenchman went down with the lad atop of him.

'Help! help! I have one of them here,' bawled Geoffrey, wresting away the man's weapon, and then kneeling on him and threatening him with it, shortening it and inserting the point between his visor-bars.

'Yield thee or I will strike!' Geoffrey panted.

'I yield me,' growled the knight in English. 'Suffer me to rise.'

'Not so, until I have help to bind thee. Ho, hither

friends! Here is one of them. Come and help me secure him!'

'Let me go, and the purse of gold in the breast-pocket of my surcoat is thine,' quickly and anxiously whispered his prisoner. 'Quick, take the purse, and get off me ere it be too late.'

'I want not thy gold. Thou art my prisoner, and as such I am going to hand thee over to the royal attendants. Ho, there, guards! Hither! Hither!'

Several men-at-arms came running up, and to them Geoffrey was consigning his prisoner when the King and the Black Prince, wearing loose wrappers over their night attire, came hurrying to the spot.

'They have caught one of the daring varlets, father—a knight by the look of his armour,' cried the young prince. 'Who art thou, sirrah?'

The knight made no reply.

'Remove his helmet!' ordered the King, boiling over with suppressed passion.

'Ah, Geoffrey, and was it thou who took him?' demanded the prince, espying our hero in his airy, white vestment.

'Even so, your Grace,' responded the squire. 'I heard the sentry outside my door attacked, and rushed forth in time to raise the alarm. I saw this knight——'

'What! 'Tis to thee then we owe our narrow escape—the defeat of this most daring attempt to capture us—my royal father and me?'

'Yea, your Grace,' answered one of the men-at-arms, as the lad remained silent. 'Had he not raised a warning shout we had all been ridden down ere we could have known there was aught wrong, and yourself and his Majesty must both have been taken in your beds.'

The prisoner's helmet was unlaced and lifted from his shoulders. The face of a man of about forty-five was revealed—a swarthy, saturnine, puffy face with thin lips, and shifty, sinister eyes of steel blue.

'What! Sir John de Maltravers?' ejaculated King Edward, staring in amazed fury at sight of his features. 'Accursed, trebly-dyed traitor, thou wert in this attempt to carry me off a captive in the midst of my own camp!

Thou wert not satisfied with thy attempt to slay me on my journey to Rising! Ah, well, thou wilt not be afforded another opportunity of trying to injure thy liege lord. Away with him to the nearest tree, men, and hang him upon it.'

The traitor was being hustled from the spot when the King called out:

'No, do not hang him now. That would be too swift and easy a death for him, the base ingrate and miscreant. Place him in safe custody till morning, subject him to all the disgrace he so well deserves. The spurs he is unfit to wear shall be hacked from his heels by the cook's cleaver, and I will string him up with a dog tied to them instead.

'But 'tis only what I deserve—this black treachery—for having ever pardoned one of the detestable murderers of my hapless father. God rest his soul at this hour!'

The Black Prince turned to Geoffrey Halford.

'Master squire,' he said, with a smile, 'thou hast broken out of the arrest I put thee under, but under the circumstances I suppose I must overlook that transgression. Father, it is to this gallant young man we owe our narrow escape from the bold surprisers. This is the second time he hath saved England her sovereign's life mayhap.'

King Edward beamed gratefully upon the embarrassed Geoffrey, all his rage over the thwarted attempt to capture him and at the recognition of Maltravers evaporating.

'Young sir, thou deservest some token of our royal gratitude for thy timely warning. Thanks to thee and our faithful guards, who threw themselves in the way of the surprisers, my son and I were enabled to escape from our beds through the back of the tents and take refuge in my lord Warwick's. I see thou hast broken thy sword in opposing the escape of our daring foes. Take this, and be ever as prompt as thou wert to-night in unsheathing it in defence of thy sovereign and that sovereign's rights.'

And so saying, he unbuckled his own gold-hilted and bejewelled sword from the splendid knightly belt he had

girded on hastily over the loose robe he had thrown over his airy night raiment and handed it to Geoffrey.

The amazed and delighted youth threw himself on one knee as he took the truly regal gift, and, raising the hem of the King's garment, kissed it ecstatically.

'O sire, your generosity knoweth no bounds and far exceedeth the humble service it was but my duty to perform,' he stammered; 'a service there is not a page nor archer in your army would not have likewise done.'

'That may be, but sith it was thou who did it, the credit is thine,' replied the King, smiling. 'Go to, boy! Edward of England, me trusteth, knoweth how to reward faithful services as well as base ingratitude and treachery,' flashing a fierce look after the retreating men-at-arms with the prisoner.

'This attempt,' he continued, 'reminds me of Douglas's bold effort in Scotland twenty years agone. My brave chaplain and chamberlain sacrificed their lives for my safety on that occasion. Well, my Lord Warwick, have ye captured any more of the adventurous knaves?'

This to that nobleman, who came hurrying up with other lords and gentlemen.

'Some dozen, sire—all varlets and youthful squires, with never one of any degree amongst them,' answered Warwick. 'They are all Bretons by their accent. My Lords Willoughby, Stafford, Chandos, and others are in hot pursuit of the rest of the brigands who managed to cut their way out of the camp. They were led by a young knight or squire of herculean strength, though small stature, who burst his way through all who opposed him more like a wild beast than a man.'

'Who can he be?' asked the Black Prince, with eyes glowing in chivalrous admiration of this unknown foe, 'a champion of note without doubt.'

'The prisoners will, no doubt, be able to tell us his name and lineage, your Grace,' said Warwick.

'He called himself Bertrand du Guesclin, your Grace,' observed Geoffrey Halford. 'Twas he who broke my sword. He shattered it with his own double-handed one, and could have taken my life. But he hurled me

out of his path, telling me to keep my life, that it was not with boys Bertrand du Guesclin fought.'

'A right gallant foe! Bertrand du Guesclin! Have any of ye ever heard the name before, ye lords and gentlemen?' asked the youthful prince with deep interest.

'Nay, your Grace.'

'Nor I.'

'Nor I.'

'I should like to meet him, and trust to, one of these days,' said the Black Prince. 'I trow it would be knightly advancement indeed to overcome a gentleman of his doughtiness and high-minded gallantry.'

He little dreamed how his wish would be realized, that in the years to come he, a prince of the royal blood of the proudest country in the world, would deem it an honour to match swords with this unknown young Breton squire; be proud to entertain him as a prisoner of distinction.

The whole camp stood to their arms the rest of the night, in case the garrison of Calais should be encouraged by the uproar to sally out and fall upon it. Bertrand du Guesclin and the remnant of his daring band, which numbered about two hundred men, all worthy of their fearless, impetuous leader, got away, eluding all pursuit. And those who had gone in chase of them came riding back towards daybreak, fuming with disappointment and splashed with mud from head to heel.

'Nay, then, but thou art the luckiest wight, Geoffrey,' said his brother-squire, Reginald Mortloe, to him when they met. 'Presented with the royal Edward's own sword! Let me look at it. By my halidom, but it is a gift worthy of its late owner. Saw ye ever before such magnificent chasing as this on the scabbard? And the hilt! Those jewels—how they flash! They would fetch thee many a good rose-noble, lad, an thou wert ever driven to the Jews.'

'Out on thee, Rex! As if I would ever turn his gracious Majesty's noble and generous gift to such a base use.'

'I was but joking, thou silly loon! Well, well, thou art in truth a minion of old Dame Fortune, Geoff. A prisoner under arrest, under the prince's displeasure one

day, and the recipient of kingly honours the next. But I envy thee not thy rare luck, lad. Thou deservest it to the full.'

Many other young squires and knights came to look at the handsome gift, and had Geoffrey not been the modest youth he was, his head might well have been turned by their evident envy of his good fortune.

XIX

HOW GEOFFREY WON HIS SPURS

The siege of Calais dragged on its weary, monotonous length. Sir John de Vienne, the valiant governor, drove out of its gates 1,700 poor persons he deemed 'useless mouths,' and King Edward, with that noble magnanimity that at times so distinguished him, gave them two sterlings each and suffered them to pass through his lines. But on 500 more 'useless mouths' being expelled from the city, he had them driven back with sword and pike.

John de Vienne sent urgent entreaties to the French king, imploring relief. 'We have eaten the horses, dogs, and all the unclean animals, even the rats that infest our cellars,' he wrote. 'Unless help is shortly sent us we will be forced to draw lots and eat each other.'

Geoffrey Halford had seen very little of Sir Rupert de Mowbray during the past months. They belonged to different divisions of the army, and so were not thrown much in each other's way. Whenever they did meet, the young knight glowered darkly upon our hero, but strode past without a word. Cyril Branscombe, too, avoided Geoffrey as much as possible, probably dreading his ire, and as in the field the squires and pages were quartered apart, and not thrown much together as in times of peace, he was easily able to do this.

The traitor, Maltravers, had once more eluded the doom he so richly deserved. He had effected his escape through the agency of some person or persons unknown two hours after he was ordered into custody. The back of the tent he was incarcerated in was slit open with a knife, without the guards stationed at the door being a whit the wiser, his bonds were cut, and he was furnished

with a cloak and hood, such as was worn by the women frequenting the camp, in which disguise he succeeded in making his way out of the lines during the confusion and disorder that prevailed after Bertrand du Guesclin's daring foray.

'Geoffrey Halford,' said the Black Prince, when our young squire and Mortloe presented themselves before him, on the morning that the scouts reported the approach of Philip's army, to receive their orders, 'I am going to entrust to thee a command to-day. Take a hundred lances and the Archers of the Fens under thy old acquaintance, Dickon, and proceed along the road to St. Omer, taking the bridge over the swampy ground at Ardres. The lord of Hunstanton guards the bridge. He will permit thee and thy detachment to pass, on representation of this order.

'Thou wilt follow the road to St. Omer until thou meetest with Sir Rupert de Mowbray, who went that way on a foraging expedition last night, and hath not returned. It may be that he hath only been delayed in the procurement of the provisions, but it may very well be that he hath been cut off, in which case, as his detachment was a fairly strong one, it may be that he is defending himself somewhere along the road — holding some village—an it be so you will promptly dispatch a swift rider with tidings to us in camp, and assist him to the best of your power until we can hurry up a stronger force to both your succour.

'It is a dangerous task I am setting thee, Geoffrey. Thou and thy band may be cut to pieces and never return, but I rely on thy valour and proved discretion, in great measure, and if thou comest to blows, and accomplish the discomfiture of the enemy, thou wilt exchange thy silver spurs for a pair of gold, and be dubbed a knight.'

'Oh, my noble Grace, you are too generous, and it needs not the promise of such a guerdon to allure me to do my best. I am only too delighted to be entrusted with this command, showing the high confidence you repose in my humble abilities.'

'I am sure of that, Geoffrey, and I sincerely hope to meet thee again, and have the pleasure of seeing thee

knighted by my royal father. Now go, and God be with thee in thy bold undertaking! Master Mortloe, I have other and equally important work for thee.'

With a proud and swelling heart, utterly regardless of the dire peril of the task set him, Geoffrey Halford proceeded to where Chandos's company was stationed. One hundred lances may seem a small number to be detailed for such an important and difficult duty, but it did not mean simply one hundred men-at-arms. Each mail-clad horseman was invariably accompanied by a mounted archer and three followers on foot—another archer, a billman, and a man armed with a pike, or a flail, a weapon consisting of a spiked ball dangling from a chain at the end of a short staff, a dreadful implement at close quarters when wielded by an active and powerful fellow.

With Dickon o' the Fens' hundred lusty varlets, therefore, our hero's command would number six hundred men, of whom three hundred carried the deadly long-bow, the king of English weapons thenadays. The mounted archers, too, were each practically two men, on account of their horses.

The famous old knight received the young squire with the utmost distinction, and our hero was quickly riding at the head of his lances to the post of the Archers of the Fens. These greeted him with loud cheers, and when he announced his mission to them, their enthusiasm knew no bounds.

Dickon threw his cap high in the air, as he made answer:

'I have longed for this hour, Master Halford, when I should fight under thy lead. Thy hand—thy hand, noble youth! I will prove to thee this day, if given the chance, how much I love thee. I will gladly lay down my life for thee. It shall go hard indeed with us all ex-outlaws but thou wilt wear the spurs of a belted knight this eventide.'

They marched out of the camp and took their way to the marshes. Soon the long causeway which spanned these appeared in view. Sir Eustace de Mowbray's force was posted behind strong double palisades, and deep entrenchments, guarded by draw-

bridges at its head. Cantering forward, Geoffrey was halted by a challenge from a picket.

'An order from his Grace for your noble lord,' answered Geoffrey, saluting respectfully with his sword. A man-at-arms was sent to the head of the causeway for the old lord; and he presently arrived and took the dispatch.

'Heaven shield us, Master Halford! We are like to see hot work before the day is out. I trust, howbeit, to grasp thy hand again as joint-victor with me of this part of the field.'

They shook hands, and Geoffrey rode on across the causeway at the head of his troop. The lord of Hunstanton stood looking after him for some time like one in a dream.

'I cannot get the fancy out of my head,' he murmured. 'He is so like—so like to her. He hath the same eyes, hair, and voice. But it is impossible, and foolish of me to entertain the silly notion. The child must have died, as was reported. Did not Barnaby, the jester, assure me he found its mantle with its nurse's wimple by the river bank? And yet—and yet children have been thought dead before, and afterwards found alive and well! I must make inquiries on my return to England, seek out his putative father, the innkeeper, Roger Halford, and satisfy myself.'

Geoffrey and his little force gained the farther end of the causeway, and, passing between two strong towers, full of archers, and crossing a drawbridge, continued his way along the road winding through the smiling champaign country beyond.

For over an hour he marched steadily forward, at an easy pace on account of the foot soldiers; then all at once one of the half-dozen men-at-arms he had thrown out ahead as an advance guard came galloping madly back toward the main body. They were ascending a steep winding lane between high cliffs at the time, and the advance had just tapped the brow of the hill.

'What bring ye?' called out Geoffrey to the messenger.

'There be a most desperate fight in progress just ahead over the hill-top, Master Squire. 'Twould seem

to be some of our countrymen, a foraging party or such, cut off and hard beset by a superior force of the enemy. The hobler sent me back to tell ye.'

At that moment on the wind came borne the sound of distant shouting.

Geoffrey Halford's eyes gleamed. The longed-for chance to win his spurs had come.

'Ride, messenger, to the camp at top speed, and take your news to his Grace, the noble young Prince of Wales. Forward! Gallop!' He shouted to the men-at-arms. 'Up and over the hill with you. Follow, archers! It is the noble young knight, Sir Rupert de Mowbray, without a doubt, with his foraging party, whom we are in search of.'

And plunging his spurs deep into 'Silver Blaze's' flanks, he thundered up the slope, followed by his men-at-arms. The mounted archers rode after, and the ex-rangers of the fens, the billmen and pikemen ran their hardest in the wake.

Gaining the top of the hill, Geoffrey beheld some two hundred yards below him, a cross lane or gully, arched over and thickly lined on either side with trees and hedges. The mouth of the lane was blocked by a rude barricade of carts, and behind the barricade a small body of troops, flying the red cross of St. George, could be seen fiercely contending hand to hand with a swarming mass of foemen, who were, therefore, between those they were assailing and the new-comers.

'Fall on! Fall on! St. George for Merrie England!' yelled Geoffrey.

With a wild yell that struck terror into the hearts of the already exultant French, he and his men-at-arms tore down the hill, while the mounted archers, bending their bows, poured in a deadly volley.

The French had broken down or burst over the barricade of wagons, and Sir Rupert was fighting in the forefront of his men. With a mighty clap, Geoffrey burst in amongst the reeling, dismayed mob of mingled horse and foot at the approach to the cross lane, and now giving back from it in order to meet him. He impaled on his lance a footman, who slashed at him with a ghisarm—a kind of pole-axe and bill-hook

combined—then tossed the encumbered weapon aside and whipped up his battle-axe from his saddle-bow. Right and left he laid about him with it, beating aside the pike-thrusts, and the mob of foes gave back, and cleared a ring hastily around him. Forward he pressed for the barricade, his men keeping close up, and about him.

A knight in gold-ornamented armour, and nodding plume, evidently a noble, barred his path, and at the same time three squires assailed him with brandished swords. Silver streaks flashed for an instant in the sunlight before his eyes, and the noble and two of the squires fell out of their saddles with grey-goose shafts driven half-way through their mailed bodies. Dickon o' the Fens was looking after the safety of his beloved young leader with two more of the surest sharp-shooters among the rangers.

Geoffrey clove the third squire over the left haffit, and, causing his horse to make a demi-volt, evaded the strokes of three French billmen and turned into the gully. It was thronged by a confused mob of the enemy on horse and foot, breaking back from a united charge by Sir Rupert's men. These had seized the advantage caused by the diversion, and rushed from their entrenchment. Well in advance pressed the young knight, Sir Rupert, carried away by the battle-fever.

'*A moi! A moi!* Rally—rally,' bellowed a burly French knight on horseback, wielding a heavy iron mace and furiously riding down his own stumbling, retreating countrymen on foot, as he strove to get to the fore-front of the *mêlée* and meet Rupert.

At his cry and encouraging example, the dispirited Fench rallied, turned upon their late foes, and, beating them back, disordered as they were by the ardour of the onslaught, followed them up, huzzaing wildly.

Sir Rupert was cut off, separated by nearly half a score yards from his men in an instant, and surrounded by a maddened throng of foemen. Showers of blows were rained upon him, but he defended himself with desperate valour, receiving some of them upon his shield and laying about him vigorously with his good sword.

'Leave him to me, men!' yelled the French

knight who had revived the fainting spirits of his countrymen.

But even as the shout went up, a French billman shored a fore leg of Rupert's charger clean off at the knee and the poor beast fell upon its head, throwing its rider. He was up again in a moment, apparently unhurt.

'Leave him to me—I will fight him on foot!' roared the French knight, with the chivalry of the times.

And reining in, he sprang from the saddle and advanced upon Rupert with gleaming sword, the common French soldiers falling back and forming a ring round them. A few swift blows and parries, and the young English knight was beaten to his knees by the superior strength and skill of his antagonist. His sword fell from his nerveless clutch, and, swaying over, he sank supine, evidently stunned or partially so.

'Take him up across your saddle-bow and carry him to the rear, Vaudemont,' cried the victor, springing once more to horse.

The squire addressed dismounted to obey. Geoffrey Halford had seen the extremity of his rival, and was spurring madly to the rescue. In that moment our gallant young squire forgot, cared naught for, the bitterness of feeling existing between them; that the youthful knight also loved the girl who had enslaved his own affections, and was more like to win her.

The space between was temporarily cleared of all but the dead and dying—who, however, still nearly choked the narrow passage—by the forward rush again of the French in the van. Behind, the enemy were fighting a rear action with the young English squire's men-at-arms who had failed to burst through with their leader. 'Silver Blaze' bounded over the litter of corpses, and tore up to the group around the captured young knight. Vaudemont, the French squire, had lifted the latter across his horse's back in front of his saddle-bows and mounted to ride back with him. The French leader and the rest had galloped on to the barricade.

Up dashed Geoffrey. The French squire threw forward his shield and drew back his sword. As they came alongside, Geoffrey made a furious feint at the other's

head. Vaudemont jerked up his shield to intercept the expected blow and at the same time lunged at his foe's heart. Geoffrey threw himself quickly sideways in the saddle. The sword missing his body, passed harmlessly by, and bringing his axe round with a terrific side-cut, he laid open the French squire's helmet just above the ear.

As Vaudemont fell from the saddle, the young conqueror, letting his trusty battle-axe dangle by the light chain that confined it to his wrist, seized Rupert's senseless body. Despite its weight on account of its iron panoply, he dragged it across his own horse's neck. Barely had he done so when back came tearing the French van with Sir Rupert's men once more raging at their heels. Most of the fugitives ran by without making a vengeful blow at him, and clapping spurs once more to 'Silver Blaze's' flanks, Geoffrey plunged into the stampeding throng. Wielding his battle-axe with might and main, he hewed a passage through it, the dismayed Frenchmen giving way, making room for him with panic-stricken cries, believing the whole of the new arrivals were on them. He gained the spot where the French knight was desperately striving to hold the ground they had gained and check the rout.

'"Tis but a single squire who comes. Turn, ye cowards, ye poltroons, and beat them back!' roared he. 'I'll soon settle this daring youth *Mil tonnerres!* if he has not rescued my prisoner!'

The gallant Frenchman wheeled his heavy charger and dashed at the English youth. His blood-dripping sword described a swift circle in mid-air. But quick as lightning Geoffrey ducked, and the blade swept harmlessly over him, so close, however, it only just missed striking the crest of his helmet. The next moment 'Silver Blaze' struck the French knight's horse. Chest to flank they met, with a deafening clang from iron poitrine and flankard, and the French knight's charger, overborne by the superior momentum of the other, went down upon its knees.

'Guard Sir Raoul!' went up the shout from the Frenchman's attendants in wild dismay, as he reeled in his saddle with the shock.

But too late the warning shout. Geoffrey's axe descended with all the force of his strong and swift young arm. Sir Raoul saved himself from utter destruction by an involuntary dodge aside, but the stroke caught him on the visor and lopped it clean off and, stunned and with the blood gushing from his nose, he tumbled headlong to earth.

A cry of horror went up from his followers round, and Geoffrey was immediately invested by a circle of foes thirsting for vengeance. A shower of blows he could not guard fell upon him, and he was beaten out of his saddle in a trice, bruised, senseless, and bleeding.

When he came round he was lying upon the turf with a leech bathing his temples, and the Black Prince, Chandos, Sir Eustace de Mowbray, and a group of other nobles and knights around him. Outside this circle his roving glance fell upon Dickon o' the Fens, with a blood-stained bandage tied round his head, holding 'Silver Blaze,' looking 'as fresh as paint,' by the bridle.

'Geoffrey, thou hast acquitted thyself this day in a way that should live in story,' said his gracious young lord. 'Well, indeed, has thou earned the spurs of knighthood; and my royal father will dub thee Sir Geoffrey on our return to camp. How feelest thou? Canst get on thy feet?'

'I think so, your Grace,' Geoffrey replied, a delighted thrill at the prince's words making him oblivious of the aches that racked his head and limbs. And he attempted to rise.

But everything swam before him, and his legs collapsed under him. He sank back with a groan he could not suppress.

'Fetch a litter and remove him on it,' ordered the Prince of Wales.

'The French, your Grace—are they beaten off?' asked Geoffrey, faintly.

'Aye, that they be. They fled on the fall of their leader, and, had I but come up more quickly with the reinforcements, we had taken him prisoner, I trow. But his men carried him off. It was well for you and Sir Rupert, though, that I determined to follow you with a goodly force, without awaiting your news. Else were ye both

shent this day. Natheless, Master Halford, thou hast indeed done wonders. To thee is due the whole credit of Sir Rupert's delivery. Without thy splendidly rendered aid, he had been overborne of a verity.'

'Let me add my praises to those of his Grace,' said the Lord of Hunstanton. 'I have to thank thee for the dashing rescue of my son; he had been carried off a prisoner, else. I understand there was some animosity between you, but this—this noble revenge—must endear thee to him as much as it has to myself. My gallant, heroic lad, accept a father's fervent thanks and lifelong affection.'

And with the tears coursing down his cheeks, Sir Eustace wrung Geoffrey's hands.

'What of Sir Rupert? How maketh he?' asked Geoffrey. 'He was not sore hurt, I trust.'

'Nay, he was but stunned as thou wert. He is on his way to camp in a litter. Thou wilt see him anon, after thou hast been given thy spurs.'

Four of the Archers of the Fens, bearing a litter, came up with Reginald Mortloe, and Geoffrey was placed in it and borne back to camp, his brother-squire congratulating him as they went upon his good fortune.

'I knew thy spurs were as good as won, old lad, when the prince gave thee that appointment. As for me, I was sent down to the beach in command of a turm* of horse. But the French King did not venture an advance against our defences there. Natheless, there is sure to be hot work shortly, in which I hope to win my spurs like unto thee.'

* Troop or company.

XX

HOW GEOFFREY AND RUPERT BECAME FRIENDS

On the return to camp, a glass of wine and other light refreshments, as well as a bath, restored Geoffrey Halford to his wonted vigour. His head and bruised limbs still ached from the rough usage he had received, but his iron panoply had saved him from all cuts. In the shock of battle, knights and men-at-arms were rarely slain or badly wounded on account of their armour, save when a battle-axe, mace, or trenchant sword-slash split open or crushed in their helmets. As a rule they were only stunned and bruised, though sometimes they were choked by their own blood behind their closed visors, or stabbed as they lay helpless, by their adversaries on foot, between the joints of their plates. It was very different when these mail-clad horsemen got in amongst the totally unarmoured billmen and archers. Then the slaughter of the poor footmen was terrible.

In order to fit himself for the accolade which would make him a knight on the morrow, Geoffrey had to spend the night in prayer alone in a chapel, watching the arms he was henceforth to bear. The shield was gules, i.e. of a red colour, and the device was a silver boar incensant, or in a furious angry position, transfixed with a broken spear, in memory of his gallant rescue of the Lady Sybil Penthony. On a scroll at the foot of the shield was the motto '*Par Valeur et Fidélité* (By Valour and Fidelity). The Black Prince had chosen the arms for him, and could not have chosen more acceptable ones. He himself would not have dared to suggest such.

It was about half an hour after his return to his tent next morning, when the Prince of Wales with a glittering train came to conduct him to the presence of the King. Edward of England stood at the door of his own

magnificent pavilion, surrounded by the greater part of his nobility. And drawn up in companies and turms, or squadrons, around were thousands of the soldiers, archers, billmen, and men-at-arms. The Rangers of the Fens were marshalled in the forefront of the array, given the place of honour in return for their recent exploit. Dickon, their centenar, still wearing the bloody bandage across his temples—proud token of his valour—stood a few paces in front of their line. The Black Prince, who, with all his train, was afoot like Geoffrey, took that blushing, overjoyed young fellow by the hand and led him up to the King, amid the deafening plaudits of the assembled multitude. Edward III beamed upon the gallant young squire.

'Master Halford, it is meet I should listen to my son's ardent commendation of your valour this day, and reward it as it deserveth. Already on two distinct occasions have I had cause to recognize thy deeds of courage. With thine own hand, young as thou art, didst thou beat Sir Raoul de Frillac, one of the most noted warriors of the age, bleeding and stunned, from his saddle. And to thy valorous action withal doth our young knight, Sir Rupert de Mowbray, owe his rescue from sure captivity. Kneel, brave youth, and receive the meed of thy derring-do!'

Geoffrey knelt, and the monarch, taking the sword the Black Prince offered him, flourished it, saying:

'Squire and gentleman, Geoffrey Halford, didst thou kneel down. Rise up, Sir Geoffrey Halford, Knight of Dersingham Manor, midway between Lynn and Hunstanton, which estate we confer upon thee, and the heirs of thy body, by the tenure of feudal service to thy lord, his Grace the Prince of Wales!'

He laid the flat of the sword lightly on Geoffrey's shoulder, and the new knight rose amid the renewed cheers of the soldiers, none of whom hurrahed more enthusiastically or with sincerer delight than the Archers of the Fens.

A young knight in silk and velvet ran up and threw himself on one knee before the King. It was Sir Rupert, pale as death and with an ugly bruise upon the right temple. He staggered and nearly fell, as he bent knee.

'Sire, I crave the favour of buckling on the new knight's spurs,' he cried, in a voice hoarse with emotion and weakness. 'It is the least I can do to show him my gratitude, the changed feelings I entertain for him. We—we have been at variance, you may not know, but your son knoweth. We had a quarrel and came to blows some time agone. But all bitterness is now at an end between us. He hath conquered my resentment by his rescue of me this day from the foemen's hands, and fain would I testify thus publicly my sorrow for what is past, my ardent wish henceforth to call him brother.'

The King's face lighted up, and a pleased look came into the Black Prince's countenance.

'This does thee credit, Sir Rupert de Mowbray, and it pleaseth me well to see two such chivalrous young gentlemen reunited in the bonds of true friendship,' said the monarch. 'By all means thou must have thy wish.'

He motioned to the herald, who had approached with a pair of gold spurs, to hand them to Rupert. The young knight took them in one hand, and held out the other to the new-made knight.

'Geoffrey, I ask thy pardon for the insult I put upon thee some months back, the blow I struck thee then, and which thou didst so well repay shortly after, as also the vile accusation I made against thee. I am fully satisfied now thou never could'st have uttered the slander. Here is my hand. Let us henceforth be as brothers, never to be estranged by aught that may hap. Never shall I forget, whate'er betide, that I owed my escape from French captivity to thy magnanimous conduct this day.'

With his face suffused with true delight, Geoffrey grasped the proffered hand and shook it cordially.

'Say no more, Sir Rupert, I beg of thee. As thou sayest, we are as brothers from this hour, true and leal comrades.'

'Nay then, thou must call me Rupert, as I will call thee Geoffrey. I mean to be as intimate, from this on, as we have heretofore been distant.'

So saying, young de Mowbray stooped and unfastened the silver spurs on Geoffrey's heels, and replaced them with the gold ones, while the knights and nobles around added their cheers to those of the common soldiers in

admiration of this sealing of friendship between the two late enemies.

'And now I dismiss thee, Sir Geoffrey Halford,' said the King with a smile. 'My son hath lost a faithful body-squire, but he hath gained, I trust, an equally faithful vassal knight. I make no doubt Sir Rupert and his father will be pleased to entertain thee the rest of the day, for I presume, Eddie, lad,' turning to the Black Prince, 'thou wilt excuse thy new knight from further duty to-day.'

'Were not I to, I should be outdone by Sir Rupert in gratitude and generosity,' laughed the young prince. 'Take him with thee, Sir Rupert, by all means.'

Bowing low to the King and his son, the young knights linked arms and walked away towards Geoffrey's tent. As they passed through the lines of the soldiers, these cheered them to the echo.

'Thou must spend the afternoon with my father and me, Geoffrey,' said Rupert. 'Come, the old man is all eagerness to see thee. I received strict injunctions to bring thee back with me, e'en by force an it were necessary.'

'Then certes I must accompany thee,' smiled Geoffrey. 'I have no wish to be haled a prisoner by my own countrymen, and least of all by thee after this, though I must confess thou hast already captured my heart, Rupert.'

Some of the Hunstanton retainers came up, leading their young lord's horse. 'Silver Blaze' was fetched from Geoffrey's tent; and, mounting, the young knights rode at the head of the party down to the bridge at Ardres, chatting as if they had been friends from boyhood of the old home country—Lynn, Hunstanton, and neighbourhood.

'When we return home, thou must stay with us at Hunstanton while thy manor-house is being built,' said Rupert. 'Wert ever there?'

'Twice or thrice only. I have been inside St. Mary's Church, and I have looked upon the walls of thy father's castle, little dreaming at the time I should ever rise to the dignity of being called a friend by its inmates.'

'I promise thee rare sport. We will hawk, and

chase the deer and the boar together. Dost remember how thou didst save me and the Lady Sybil Penthony from the boar at Rising? This is the second time thou hast proved my deliverer.'

Old Sir Eustace de Mowbray came riding out to receive them as they came in sight of the post.

'Welcome, Sir Geoffrey! Thou must call me friend henceforth as well as Rupert. So thou hast got thy spurs? Didst buckle them on, Rupert?'

'I did, father, with his gracious Majesty's permission.'

'It pleased him and the noble prince well, I take it, your reunion in friendship?'

'Thou mayest well say so, father. But nothing could add to my own pleasure in making friends with my brother-knight. We have settled all our differences, father, and henceforward will be the truest of comrades. I shall allow naught to come between us again.'

'I trust thou wilt be as good as thy word. And ever I hear you have fallen out by any mischance, thou wilt earn my deepest displeasure, and wilt have to reckon with thy old dad, Sir Rupert.'

'Dost know, Sir Geoffrey, thou remindest me greatly of one who must be in the grave?' observed Sir Eustace, as the three were supping in his tent. 'An it were possible the dead could return to life, I should say thou wert he. But, of course, 'tis foolish of me. Yet from the first hour I clapped eyes on thee at Castle Rising, doubts have risen in my mind, the wild hope thou mightst prove to be the lad.'

'What lad, father?' asked Rupert in surprise. 'To whom dost refer?'

'To thy young brother Eustace, Rupert, who was stolen from us when a baby eighteen years ago, and drowned as we believed in the Ouse with the nurse who kidnapped him. Thou hast the same blue eyes and fair hair, Geoffrey, he inherited from his mother. Thou tookest after me, Rupert. And he would be the same age as thou, Geoffrey, did he live.'

Rupert stared with increased interest at Geoffrey, who smiled and shook his head.

'Nay, Sir Eustace, it is impossible I can be that

lost son. My father, as everybody in Lynn knows, is Roger Halford of the White Hart Inn, in the Market Place.'

'I suppose there can be no doubt of that?'

'I should think not, Sir Eustace.'

With that, Geoffrey, thinking the topic must be a painful one to the old lord, hastened to speak on other matters and so divert his thoughts from it. It was late when Rupert rode back part of the way with Geoffrey, to the 'City of Wood.' They parted with an invitation from the former that the latter should visit them again on the morrow.

The French King realized he could only cut his way through the English lines to Calais at great loss and risk. He feared running on destruction as he had done at Cressy. Accordingly, he had recourse to negotiation. Four peers were dispatched by him under a flag of truce to Edward with the offers to cede Guienne, together with the Earldom of Ponthieu, if the English would evacuate the country. Edward rejected the offer, as may well be supposed. Thereupon Philip sent word that he was there to do battle, but could find no way to reach his brother monarch. Would that brother monarch, his good cousin of England, be so kind as to come out into the open field, to a place a meeting of counsel from both sides should select, there to decide the quarrel by a general engagement?

King Edward replied: 'Here I am, and here I am going to remain. An my worthy cousin of France wants me, he knoweth where to find me. He is welcome to join battle with me when he so pleaseth, but certes I am too comfortable here to go to the trouble of choosing another battle-ground, as well as too prudent, I trust, to forgo the advantages of the position I occupy.'

Has history a parallel to the pusillanimous conduct of Philip of Valois on the receipt of this message? He wheeled about his vast army there and then, and retraced the way he had come, abandoning to their miserable fate the starving citizens and garrison of Calais. Left thus, they had no alternative but to seek the tender mercies of Edward. The governor, Sir John de Vienne, appeared upon the town walls and signalled

to the English sentinels he desired a parley. King Edward sent forward the great and good Sir Walter Manny of Hainault—who had accompanied Queen Philippa to England, and was almost as renowned a general as Chandos—with Lord Basset, to reply that the garrison must surrender at discretion, submit to be ransomed, or put to death at his pleasure.

'Sirs, these are too hard conditions,' answered the French governor. 'Is this the treatment brave men are entitled to? The inhabitants of Calais have done nothing more than their duty, which should please, rather than offend the King, your master, especially so gallant a prince as he hath shown himself hitherto to be. We are but a small company of knights and squires who have truly served our lord and master, as ye would had ye been in our place. We have suffered much ill and disquiet, but we will endure more than any men did in a similar plight, before we consent that the smallest boy in the town should fare worse than the best amongst us. An it be our fate to be devoted, we shall not die unrevenged. We are not yet reduced to such an abject state as shall prevent our selling our lives at a high price to the victors. I, therefore, entreat you out of true humanity to return to the King of England and beg him to have pity on us.'

Sir Walter repaired to the King and implored him of his mercy to show the vanquished greater generosity. But Edward was enraged at the obstinate defence of the city, and said he would grant no favour. 'I fully intend they shall all starve or be killed,' he made answer.

'Let me represent to you, sire,' returned Manny, 'the dreadful consequences that may result from so dangerous a precedent, an you treat the people of Calais with this unusual rigour. It cannot fail to increase the miseries of the war, already sufficiently severe. An you show no mercy, your men can expect none from the French when they may chance to be taken prisoners, and they may be less ready to defend your towns and castles, for they are liable to be placed in the same situation.'

This sensible remonstrance had weight, and the Black Prince and Chandos added their voices to Manny's.

'Well, sirs,' replied the King, 'I will not be alone

against you all. Sir Walter of Manny, ye shall say to the French captain that all the grace he shall find in me now is, that they send six of the chief burghers of the town to me, bareheaded, barefooted, and barelegged, in their shirts in brief, with halters about their necks and the keys of the castle and town in their hands. Let these six yield purely to my will, and the residue I will take to mercy.'

On this communication, Sir John de Vienne went to the market-place and ordered the common bell to be rung to summon all the people. When they had assembled, he announced to them the conditions, whereupon there was much weeping and sorrow. The governor himself wept bitterly.

'We will not surrender; we will perish to the last man first,' he cried.

But up rose Eustace de St. Pierre, the wealthiest burgess of all the town.

'Not so,' he said. 'Gentlemen, great would be the pity to suffer so many people to die through famine or otherwise, when there is a means to save them. I have so good a trust in God, if I die in the quarrel to save my townsmen, that I offer myself as one of the six.'

Another burgess, John d'Aire, immediately cried out: 'And I will keep company with my gossip Eustace.'

Two brothers next stepped forward, both rich men in merchandise and lands, Jacques Wisant and Pierre Wisant. Their example was followed by two more heroic gentlemen.

Amid the wailing and lamentation of their fellow-townsmen, in the guise of malefactors as prescribed by Edward, the six devoted men went forth from the city gates and presented themselves before him.

'Sire,' said Sir Walter Manny, who conducted them to the royal presence, 'behold here the representatives of the town of Calais, according to your orders.'

'Yea, gentle King,' spoke up Eustace de St. Pierre, 'we six are burgesses of Calais, and capital merchants. We have brought you the keys of the town and castle, and submit ourselves clearly unto your will and pleasure, to save the residue of the people of Calais, who have suffered great distress.'

Edward was surrounded by a large company of earls, barons, and knights, Geoffrey Halford among the number, for this famous scene took place in the vast open space before the monarch's own pavilion. The other three sides of the square were thronged with the soldiery. Neither the Black Prince nor Chandos was present. They had absented themselves as a last protest.

The King glowered upon the hapless men, his wrath in no way mitigated by the action of his son and favourite general.

'Off with their heads!' he cried. 'Summon the executioner with his block and axe, and let him strike their heads from their shoulders, vile knaves that they be!'

The sight of the poor men in such a condition and the horrid order deeply affected all there assembled. Geoffrey Halford's generous heart was filled with tears of pity.

'Ah, gallant sire,' exclaimed the noble Sir Walter Manny, 'restrain your anger. You are esteemed a most gallant and Christian King. Do not, I entreat of you, commit an action which may endanger this reputation, or suffer evil things to be reported of you. All these brave lords and gentlemen here join with me, I wot well, in beseeching of you mercy for these six truly heroic men, who have voluntarily submitted themselves to your will to save their fellow-citizens.'

'Be silent, Sir Walter,' cried the King, with a fell look. 'Interfere not. It shall not be otherwise than I have ordered. Those varlets of Calais have put so many of my men to death in their numerous piracies that it is fit these die also.'

A female figure, clad in regal robes, came flying through an avenue in the crowd, followed at a little distance by other richly-attired ladies. It was Queen Philippa, Edward's brave, pious, and merciful wife, the same who had the year before done battle in defence of her husband's domains at home against the invading Scots, fought the battle of Neville's Cross, near Durham, and taken the Scottish King David prisoner. She had crossed the seas a few months before and joined her spouse in the camp before Calais, and, delighted with

her valorous deed, Edward had conferred the girdle of the Order of Knighthood upon her.

Rushing up to her husband now, she threw herself at his feet, bathing them with her tears.

'Ah, gentle sir,' she cried, 'sith I crossed the sea, in great peril, I have desired naught of you. Now I humbly ask as a gift, for the sake of our Blessed Redeemer, and for the love of me, that thou wilt take mercy on these six burgesses.'

The King frowned and was silent a while; then he replied:

'Dame, I would you had been elsewhere. You make such request of me that I cannot deny you. Wherefore I give you these men to do with as you please.'

The good queen had the six citizens conducted to her apartments, where she caused them to be clothed and fed. Then she presented each with six gold nobles and had them escorted out of the camp in safety.

The English army remained some little time longer in Calais, securing its triumph. The whole of the inhabitants, even the ecclesiastics, were expelled, and the place was made an English colony. Forming a good naval station, and large markets being established there for the sale of English goods, it prospered under its new masters, who held it for more than two centuries, until Queen Mary's reign. Through the mediation of the Pope's legates, a truce was now concluded with France, and the main body of the English army returned home. Geoffrey Halford sailed for England in the same 'cogge' as the Lord of Hunstanton and his son. Needless to say, he had accepted their invitation to visit them at Hunstanton Castle.

XXI

THE OMEN OF THE FALCON

The trees were wearing their prettiest autumnal tints as a gay but small cavalcade cantered leisurely along that charming and popular resort of modern holiday-makers at Hunstanton—Ringstead Downs. Sir Geoffrey Halford rode beside the Lady Sybil Penthony, some little way in front of the others. Behind them were Sir Rupert de Mowbray and Lady Beatrice Penthony.

After them rode a humbly-dressed individual with a square wooden frame about him, slung from his shoulders. On the sides of the frame were perched half a dozen Peregrine falcons or hawks with hoods, bells, and jesses on. He was the falconer or hawk trainer.

The rear of the little party was brought up by two squires bearing the banners of the young knights. They were the very antithesis of each other, one being a mere youth, handsome, tall, and slender, the other middle-aged, short, and burly, with the nose broken and bent aside at the bridge. Both, however, were on the best of terms, for young Raymond Allen had never been further from Hunstanton than Lynn or Dereham, and was all eagerness to hear Dickon Watkinson's tales of the French wars—his account of how he, as centenar of the Archers of the Fens, helped in the overthrow of the French chivalry at Cressy and the Bridge of Ardres.

For he we have hitherto known as Dickon o' the Fens was now squire to Sir Geoffrey Halford, having had the silver spurs of that rank conferred upon him for his able seconding of his gallant young leader at the ambush that scared Philip of Valois away from Calais. And Allen, while listening to his middle-aged companion's descriptions of the late campaign, entertained high hopes of participating in such brave doings himself when he

should follow Sir Rupert to the field on the conclusion of the temporary truce with France.

The sky was cloudy, but the rain kept off, which was really surprising, for it had poured almost incessantly since June. And the young gentlemen and their fair companions, heartily sick of being mewed up indoors, were fain to snatch the chance of a few hours in the open at the risk of being caught by a torrential downpour. The horses' hoofs sank deeply in the sodden turf, and under the dark woods of fir and larch crowning the gentle slope on either hand the earth was like a morass. But the wide stretches of gorse and bracken, running up in tongues to meet the copses, looked all the fresher for the rain which soaked them, and the air was fragrant with the scent of the pines and rang with the melodies of feathered songsters.

The Ladies Penthony had been on a visit to Hunstanton Castle, and the two young knights were escorting them home to Castle Rising, for Sir Geoffrey Halford was still his brother-knight's guest, his manor at Dersingham not yet being finished.

'Hast heard of this dreadful pestilence called the Black Plague, or the Black Disease, that is spreading all over Europe, Sir Geoffrey?' asked Lady Sybil.

'Who hath not, forsooth?* It is in every one's mouth,' replied Geoffrey. 'Half the earth, from all reports, is desolated by it. The havoc it hath wrought in Italy is simply appalling, I believe.'

'Pray Heaven it doth not come to England,' said the fair girl, with an alarmed look.

'There is small risk of that, methinks. The seas that gird us round should keep out such a dire invasion, as they ha' done that so oft projected by human foes. The fresh breezes that fan our shores would, I take it, kill the infection, for learned doctors ascribe it to noxious air and impure water, and the dirty habits of the Asiatics, amongst whom it first originated.'

'I have heard its cause ascribed to the frightful eruptions of nature, the fearsome quakes of the earth that

* *Forsooth* was used as a word of honour in addressing ladies. It was not until much later that it was used ironically, when a 'yea forsooth knave' meant a silly coxcomb or ladies' man.

occurred in Calabria and Poland. And Lady Alicia Crosbie told Beatrice and me that Dame Ursula, the reputed witch, she who is known as the Wise Woman of Wymondham, thou wilt remember, hath prophesied that it all portendeth the end of the world, signifieth the coming of the Day of Doom.'

Geoffrey laughed.

'I have heard of the prophecy,' he said, 'but such silly tales are always current when aught out of the ordinary happeneth. I prefer to believe the good Friar Nicholas, learned doctor as he be, before all the Wise Women, as fools call them, in Christendom. And he explaineth it as I ha' told thee. He saith that such terrible visitations are always liable to occur while people live without paying proper regard to sanitation, by which he meaneth those observations that tend to promote health, such as cleanliness in all things, the removal far from our dwellings and streets of all noisome matters which produce disease by exhaling foul gases. He also saith that when men gain the wisdom to observe the laws of health properly, pestilences like this Black Plague will be unknown.'

They had reached the western end of the Downs, and came in sight of the old church of Barret Ringstead. A flock of herons rose up out of the marshes before them, scared by their approach.

'Quick, Bertram!' cried Sir Rupert to the falconer. 'Give Lady Beatrice a falcon and me another, and we will try our luck. I wager mine striketh first, Bee.'

'Be not so sure, fair sir,' answered his companion, with eyes dancing with anticipation of the aerial chase.

The falconer hastily unloosed the jess of one of the falcons and handed the bird to the lady. She took it upon the back of her gloved right hand, whipped off its hood with her left, and cast it into the air, while yet Bertram was unloosing its mate from the frame. It flew round once or twice in a blind sort of way; and Sir Rupert, tossing off the hood of his bird, sent it spinning upwards. Soaring at once, with the preliminary circling of its fellow, it overtook and outstripped this in upward flight and led the chase after the fleeing herons.

'Thou canst give me a point in casting off, Rupert,' said the Lady Beatrice, in some little chagrin. 'But my falcon may yet prove the victor.'

'It hath small chance, Bee,' said Sybil. And they all stood watching the hunt in mid-air.

The herons descried their pursuers, and with shrill, terrified cries broke and scattered, stretching out their long necks and beating the air frenziedly with their wings. Singling out a quarry each, the falcons kept ever mounting higher and higher into the air to get over their victims, which in turn strove to outmanœuvre them. But in vain the herons' efforts. Their inexorable pursuers got over them, and that selected by the Lady Beatrice's falcon with plaintive cries came fluttering down as if it had lost all heart. Its companion held on, however.

But, swift as a dart, Sir Rupert's falcon swooped down with unerring aim, striking it with beak and claws.

'Well struck! Well——' Sir Rupert checked his utterance, as he saw the stricken heron, struggling in mid-air in its captor's grip, suddenly twist its head round and plunge its long sharp bill through the falcon's body, impaling its conqueror. The next instant captor and prey, leaving innumerable feathers floating upon the wind, came tumbling in a mixed-up heap to earth.

As they fell, the Lady Beatrice's falcon pounced upon its quarry and bore it almost as swiftly to the ground.

'Certes, I never saw the like of that before,' ejaculated Sir Rupert in amazement. 'A heron kill a falcon! Didst ever know of such a thing, Bertram?'

'I have heard of it happening, good my lord, but it is very rare,' replied the falconer. 'The bird had spirit. It spitted the poor falcon as I might a trippe of cheese on a toasting-iron.'

'My bird after all hath carried off the victory,' cried Beatrice. 'It hath not fallen a victim to its own device as thine hath, Rupert.'

''Tis an ill-omen, 'tis an unsonsy happening,' said the young knight, with gloomy brow. 'Certain of my soaring hopes, I take it, are doomed to a like downfall.'

'Nenny, but thou art not so folly-fallen, Sir Rupert, as to believe in omens,' laughed Geoffrey.

'The falcon hath met with his deserts,' exclaimed the Lady Sybil. ''Tis a cruel and spiritless sport, this hawking. I see nothing to admire in it. It is as wanton, too, as it is safe. I consider the chase after the deer or boar far nobler because more risky.'

Sir Rupert gave her a keen glance, and frowned. He turned to the falconer and growled sulkily:

'Pick me up the birds, Bertram, and do not separate the slain falcon from its slayer. I would have my father see the pair as they died. Come, ladies! It looks blackish over yonder. We had better put our horses to greater speed or we may be drenched before we are near a shelter.'

They rode on swiftly, Sir Rupert now riding beside Sybil, leaving Sir Geoffrey to entertain the Lady Beatrice. At full speed they clattered over the cobbles of the little village of Heacham, and the rain still keeping off continued their way towards Snettisham. Whenever the road permitted of it, the four rode abreast and chattered like magpies, Rupert showing no further trace of ill-humour over the hawking episode.

As they neared Dersingham, a great blackness came on and huge, scattered raindrops fell; so they had a mad gallop for the inn ahead.

They reached it only just in time. The rain descended in a perfect deluge even as the young knights were assisting the ladies to dismount. They took refuge in the bar-parlour, while the ostler and squires took the horses round to the stable.

'We may as well have some refreshment while we are waiting,' said Geoffrey; and he went off to see what was to be had.

The Lady Beatrice likewise withdrew with the serving-maid to an upstairs room to rearrange her wimple and hair, which were somewhat disordered by the wild chase for the shelter and what she had caught of the shower. Sir Rupert and Sybil were left alone, standing on the hautepace, or raised platform, in the deeply bayed, diamond-paned casement, looking out upon the pelting rain.

'Sybil,' whispered her cavalier, in tones of suppressed eagerness, 'this is the opportunity I have craved for.

I have not had a chance before of speaking with thee without risk of being overheard, and I must haste me, or Sir Geoffrey will rejoin us. I must speak now—e'en an thou bidst me afterward ne'er to speak to thee again on the matter. Sybil, I love thee; need I tell thee? I trow not. Thou hast had ample evidence of my affection, and albeit thou didst refuse me a token, an earnest, thou wert not indifferent to me on my departure for the French wars, me believeth. Thou dost care just a little for me? Sybil, my own sweeting, say thou lovest me in return, and wilt be my wife.'

The fair girl had stood as if turned to stone during this impassioned appeal, staring with unseeing eyes out of the window.

'No, no, no!' she now moaned almost affrightedly, without looking at him, but shrinking away to the other side of the embrasure, with a look of dismay on her face and clenching her hands tightly. 'I cannot—I cannot be thy wife, Sir Rupert. Say no more, I entreat thee.'

The young knight turned a ghastly hue, and he glared at her with smouldering eyes.

'And wherefore, Lady Sybil?' he asked, hoarsely. 'Tell me, prithee, wherefore thou canst not be my wife —that I should say no more.'

'Oh, ask me not—ask me not,' the girl moaned in the deepest distress. 'Rupert, I am sorry for thee, but—but I never gave thee any encouragement or, an I may ha' seemed to do any time, I meant not to. And—and I hoped, I fondly thought of late at least thou didst love Beatrice.'

'Beatrice! Nay. 'Tis thou I love, have ever loved. And thou didst think I loved her? Come to my arms, sweetheart, and I will assure thee to thy heart's content thou hast been my one and only thought.'

'Oh, no, no! I do not love thee. It is best, I see, that I should be straight with thee. I do not love thee, Rupert, and 'twere well thou didst forget this folly and say no more.'

Rupert's face went as black as a thunder-cloud.

'Thou dost not love me,' he repeated, in harsh, grating tones. 'I can see thou art not playing with

me; that thou meanest it. Nay, but thou didst love me once, I wot well, before—before this low-born upstart, Halford, appeared on the scene. 'Tis he who hath come between us, I can see. He hath stolen your heart from me—he hath spoken of love to thee and anticipated me, the base traitor, and false, disloyal friend.'

'Sir Rupert de Mowbray, thou hast no right to say such things. Sir Geoffrey hath not uttered one word of love to me. I know not that he loveth me, but an 'twere so, 'tis no affair of thine,' replied Sybil, colouring high and drawing her skirts about her as she flashed an indignant look upon him.

''Tis no affair of mine, when he whom I called my friend hath taken advantage of that friendship to insinuate himself into the affections of the girl I love! An he hath spoken no word of love to thee, it but proveth him the more artful poltroon. And hast thou, a Penthony, given thy love unasked?'

Sybil drew herself up to her full height, bestowing a most withering glance upon him, and was striding away to the next window when Sir Geoffrey re-entered with the innkeeper bearing a flagon of wine, goblets, and platters of wastel-cake. The Lady Beatrice at the same moment came tripping down the stairs. Geoffrey did not notice anything amiss, for he proceeded to assist in clearing the table of the ornaments upon it, but Beatrice saw her sister's heightened colour and Rupert's angry scowl and drew her conclusions. Her face hardened somewhat, and it was rather a gloomy little party that sat down to the refreshments. Geoffrey cracked a merry quip or two, but was quick to see the change in his companions' spirits, and wondered greatly thereat. He strove, however, to break the ice and keep the conversation going. It lagged greatly, though, and it was an evident relief to all when Dickon Watkinson put his head in from the common-room and reported the rain had left off.

'We had better on our way, then,' said Sir Geoffrey. 'We may be weatherbound here, else. I had hopes of being able to show ye, ladies, my manor close by, as far as it hath progressed, but we had better defer the inspection until a finer day.'

Sir Rupert helped Lady Beatrice into the saddle, and constituted himself her cavalier, at which, needless to remark, Sir Geoffrey was nothing displeased. They galloped hard the rest of their journey and reached Castle Rising without encountering another shower. Sir Henry Penthony received the young knights genially and pressed them to stay to none-meat, but, to Sir Geoffrey's great surprise, Sir Rupert declined.

'Nay, but I thank thee, kind sir, I ha' promised to dine with Sir Geoffrey's father at the White Hart, in Lynn, thou wottest, and he might deem it a slight an I failed to do so.'

Geoffrey stared, for he had no knowledge of such a promise, though Rupert had certainly accepted his invitation to stay the night at his father's place. Roger Halford was to keep on the inn until his son's manor was built.

As they rode away from the Castle towards Lynn, Geoffrey turned to his silent companion and asked:

'What was thy reason, old friend, for not accepting the good knight's invitation to none-meat? Thy excuse was an evasion for some reason, I wot.'

'Thou art right, Geoffrey Halford. It was an evasion, and on thy account.'

'On my account, Rupert! I rede me not your meaning.'

'Let us spur our horses to get out of the village, and bid the squires ride some distance behind us, and I will rede thee the matter an thou art so purblind.'

Puzzled greatly at his companion's words and still more at the concentrated bitterness in his tones, Sir Geoffrey turned in his saddle and told Dickon and Raymond to follow more slowly. Then he put spurs to his charger to overtake Sir Rupert, who had already set off at a furious gallop. So fast did Rupert ride, plying his spurs with might and main, that 'Silver Blaze' had some difficulty in keeping pace with him.

When they were well clear of Rising and in a narrow lane, flanked by high banks topped with dense undergrowth and tall firs growing close together, Rupert reined in.

'Geoffrey Halford, this world is not wide enough to

hold us both,' he hissed, drawing his sword, and slipping from his saddle. 'Thou must fight me. Dismount, thou poltroon, thou vile flibbergib! goad thy horse on as I do mine, so that our squires will think we have passed on and will ride by, and follow me up the bank here into the thicket, where we may settle our dispute ere they can find us.'

As he spoke he stabbed his horse savagely in the shoulder, and, as the animal reared, beat it with the flat of his sword, so that it took off at full speed along the road.

'Art gone mad?' exclaimed Geoffrey, staring at him in wild amaze.

'Aye, mad with jealous hate and fury. Off thy horse ere I brand thee coward and strike thee unarmed, thou false-hearted villain, thou base, treacherous friend! Come, we have no time to lose. The squires will come up presently.'

'What dost thou mean?' gasped Geoffrey. 'Now of a verity thou art folly-fallen, Sir Rupert. In what way have I displeased thee or given thee cause to doubt my friendship?'

'In what way, askest thou? Hast thou not won the Lady Sybil's love, that should be mine; come between us with thy glib, oily tongue, and estranged her affections from me, robbed me of them? On guard, recreant! Thou shalt fight, or by all I hold dear I will spit thee where thou sittest. Confusion! They are coming. It is too late, Geoffrey Halford—thou wilt hear from me anon.'

The tread of the squires' horses was audible round the turn in the lane. Sir Rupert turned to spring up the bank beside him, when something bright shot out of the thicket just above, flashed as it hurtled through the air, and struck him full in the breast. With a broken cry the young knight stumbled, and, turning half round in the act of falling, sank upon the sloping bank clutching at a dagger buried to the haft in his bosom.

Sir Geoffrey sat his horse in stony horror, a mark for another missile from the ambush. But none came; and, shaking off the spell that bound him, he leaped from his saddle, unsheathing his sword as he did so, and

rushed up the bank, shouting to the two squires as they appeared round the bend :

'An ambush. Look to Sir Rupert ! A hidden foe hath stricken him down ! '

He heard the sounds of people bursting away through the bushes, and chased in their direction, but the sounds suddenly ceased, and he stopped, fearing ambushment.

'Hither—hither ! This way, Dickon,' he answered, hearing his squire calling to him.

Watkinson came running through the firs towards him, to suddenly wheel aside and dash round a hawthorn. The next instant the squire reappeared, dragging after him by the wrist a woman—the Lady Alicia Crosbie.

'Lady Alicia ! ' gasped Sir Geoffrey, in wild astonishment. 'What meaneth this? '

'Unhand me, varlet ! ' screamed the waiting-woman, struggling in Dickon's rude clutch. 'O Sir Geoffrey Halford, Heaven be praised for thy coming ! I was but now returning to Castle Rising from a walk when I was seized by a robber ruffian, who dragged me here, and would doubtless have murdered me but for your coming. He threatened me with his dagger when ye halted, and I did not dare to utter a sound. And then—then poor Sir Rupert made to climb the bank and—and—Oh ! I nigh fainted at the sight—the ruffian flung his poniard at the young knight's heart and ran off, leaving me more dead than alive, unable even to scream.'

Dickon had released her; and Sir Geoffrey, doffing the plumed cap he wore, replied :

'It was right fortunate for thee, then, gracious madam, we were at hand, though most unfortunate for Sir Rupert. Let us haste to learn how he hath fared.'

Raymond Allen had raised his young lord on his knee. He was not dead, but his face was working and ghastly pale. The squire had pulled out the dagger, and was doing his best to stanch the flow of blood.

'I knew the slain falcon was an omen of malure,' the wounded knight muttered faintly. 'My cherished hope first hath been downcast, and now I myself be fey and shent.'

His eyes closed, and he slipped from Raymond's knee in a dead faint.

XXII

THE 'DARK LADY'S' FLIGHT

Dickon Watkinson bent over the wounded young knight and examined his injury carefully.

'Is he wending, or like to?' asked Geoffrey Halford anxiously.

'Nay, not yet awhile, methinks,' replied the ex-archer. 'He hath had a shrewd hurt, but the gush of blood hath relieved the choked lungs somewhat, and he but swooned from the exhaustion thereat.'

He was proceeding to bind up the wound with the rude but fairly effective surgery known to most old soldiers and men of his class in those days, when Sir Geoffrey hastily cried:

'Stay! I have here a famous remedy or simple I found efficacious in France, which was given to me by my father's housekeeper, Dame Joan. She received it when a girl from the "Wise Woman of Wymondham," not her at present known as such, but her mother, who was reputed a still cleverer simplist and spae-wife. I will apply it to Sir Rupert's hurt ere we bind him up.'

He took from his gipsire or scrip a little stoppered phial and, kneeling beside his senseless brother-knight, shook some powder from it upon the open wound.

'Now bandage it up, Dickon,' he ordered.

Dame Joan's wonderful specific was possibly the Sympathetic Powder which was first introduced to public notice by Sir Kenelm Digby in the seventeenth century, but was long before included in the pharmacopœia of quacks and 'wise women.' It was a powder of vitriol, and Sir Kenelm made known the method of its preparation in his 'Chymical Secrets.' The powder was said to be highly efficacious in 'stanching of desperate bleeding at the nose, in stanching the blood of a wound, and

in curing any green wound (where there was no fracture of bones) without any plaster or ointment, in a few days. The same cure was performed by applying the remedy to the blade of a sword which had wounded a person.' Faith was reposed in it until it was shown that it was of little importance whether application was made either to the wound or to the instrument, provided that the former was bound up, bringing the edges in opposition—the approved method of managing incised wounds at the present hour.

Dickon dressed Sir Rupert's injury, and Raymond Allen exclaimed:

'The specific, Sir Geoffrey, remindeth me that I, too, possess one, even the renowned "Lapis bezoar orientale," or Oriental Bezoar-stone, said to be worth ten times its weight in gold for its power of curing all hurts and diseases.'

He produced from his pouch, after some fumbling, a small, hard ball, the morbid secretion sometimes found in the intestines of the wild goat of Persia, formed by its agglutinated undigested food. He took this and rubbed it upon the bandage.

'I obtained it for many a good rose-noble I could ill-spare from a palmer who had returned from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land,' he said in further explanation.

'Form a litter with the lances and our cloaks,' said Sir Geoffrey, 'and we will take him back to Castle Rising. He will receive all attention there, and with Heaven's grace he will yet recover.'

Dickon and Raymond constructed the rude litter, and bore Sir Rupert upon it back along the road to Rising, while Sir Geoffrey assisted Lady Alicia Crosbie to mount his squire's horse, and, riding 'Silver Blaze' himself, led Raymond's by the bridle. They went at a slow pace on account of the wounded knight, and presently there was the clatter of hoofs and his horse came trotting after them.

Sir Henry Penthony, his good lady, and fair daughters were all horror and concern at the outrage. Rupert was at once removed to a bedroom, and had his wound redressed by the castle leech and Father Anthony, the chaplain, both Lady Sybil and Lady Beatrice constituting

themselves his nurses. Their father dispatched several mounted archers at once to scour the vicinity in pursuit of the robber, whom Lady Alicia Crosbie described as well as she could. Raymond Allen also rode off, post-haste, to Hunstanton Castle to apprise Sir Eustace de Mowbray of his son's misfortune.

Sir Geoffrey Halford said nothing, of course, of what had led up to the incident; of Rupert's mad attempt to force a quarrel upon him. He remained at Castle Rising until satisfied by the surgeon that there was no immediate danger of his comrade dying, then set out again with Dickon for his father's inn, promising to ride over later to learn what progress the patient was making.

The pair met some of the archers returning from the unsuccessful search for the unknown assailant.

'We can find no trace of the miscreant, Sir Geoffrey,' said the hobler, or corporal, 'but some of us are still questing towards Middleton, and may get news of him that-a-way. We saw a knight, with closed visor, riding alone towards Stow from the direction of Lynn, but he refused to exchange a word with us, and pressed on his way as if on an errand that booted of no delay. Of course he could not have been the assassin; dost think, sir?'

'Nay, 'twere a roberdsman — a ragged hind, the Lady Alicia said,' returned Geoffrey. But even as he uttered the words a vague supicion of the Lady Alicia obtruded itself on his mind, and he thought that perhaps the unknown knight was Rupert's would-be slayer.

He recalled with a thrill of alarm his former belief that it was the Lady Alicia he had seen at the Red Chapel with the traitor knight, who, from his overheard conversation between King Edward and Queen Isabella later in the grounds of Castle Rising, he had every reason to suppose was the ruffian regicide and conspirator, Sir John de Maltravers.

'But methinks ye should have insisted on having speech with this stranger knight, hobler,' he thought fit to add. 'And perchance 'twill be as well an ye ride after him and try to learn his identity. Treachery goeth abroad much, sith our gracious King hath laid claim to the French throne. It may be ye'll discover something of great import.'

'Nay, but we could never hope to overtake him now, fair sir, with such a long start. And it might ha' cost us our poor heads to dare stop and question a knight of unknown degree.'

'Ah, well, mayhap he rideth in all honour,' replied Sir Geoffrey, 'an my suspicion is unfounded,' he added in his own thoughts. 'Well, ride on. Ye may get wind of the miscreant yet, 'twixt here and Rising, an ye make round by Wootton hamlet.'

He and Dickon continued their way, but he was gravely concerned over what had come into his mind; and when he reached his old home and was alone with his father, he asked that worthy abruptly:

'What knowest thou of the Lady Alicia Crosbie, dad, beyond what thou didst tell me before?'

Roger Halford started violently, a fact which his son did not fail to notice, and his ruddy face lost something of its colour.

'What dost mean, Geoffrey? I know naught of her beyond what I did tell thee, as thou sayest,' he made answer promptly enough, however.

'Nay, but, father, that reply does not altogether satisfy me. Thou wilt pardon me, but I am sore suspicious of her, and thou didst change colour and start just now when I put the question to thee. Come, old dad, be straight with me—keep nothing from me, an thou'rt doing so. I have grave reason, I may tell thee, to suspect her of being leagued in a base conspiracy against our good King, with one Sir John de Maltravers, the same who with Gurney, thou knowest, executed the wicked will of the Dark Lady of Rising and Mortimer upon the King's father at Berkeley—murdered poor King Edward II.'

Roger Halford was visibly agitated. He took two or three quick strides up and down the room; then suddenly he turned and faced his son with a working face and furtive, shrinking glances.

'I will be straight with thee, Geoffrey. Thou hast spoken the cause of my uneasiness. I knew she was concerned in a plot with this Sir John de Maltravers and the Dowager Queen against the life of his sacred Majesty, and—and in so far was I privy to it. For—

for know that I am in the power of Lady Alicia. When I was in her father's service I committed a grave crime, for the which she could send me to the gallows e'en now. And so—so I dared not open my lips. Press me not further, I do entreat thee, lad, as thou lovest me—ask me not what my crime was. I—I have expiated it a hundred-fold in sincere penitence ever since.' And he made to escape from the room.

In wild horror Sir Geoffrey sprang after him and caught him by the arm.

'Tell me—tell me! 'Twas not—murder thou didst commit? Assure me of but that, and that thou art not again concerned in a plot against his Majesty, and I will torment thee no more with my curious questions.'

'I swear to thee by my hope of salvation hereafter 'twas not murder, and that I know of no plot at the moment against the Lord's anointed,' brokenly replied the innkeeper.

Then as his son released him with a sigh of ineffable relief, he panted: 'Keep thy promise now and torment me no more. Rest assured I know naught of the Lady Alicia's present doings.'

With that he hurried from the apartment, leaving the young knight immensely relieved, but a prey to the gloomiest reflections. Sir Geoffrey feared more than ever that Lady Alicia's story of the robber was a fabrication, and that the mysterious knight the archers had met was Rupert's dastardly assassin.

'Yet the dagger was only such as robbers or hinds would use,' he ruminated. 'The haft was but of wood and the blade ill tempered. For that most unhappy lady's sake I sincerely hope my dreadful suspicion of her is unjust.'

He went off in search of Dame Joan. The good old woman was deeply concerned at the news of Sir Rupert de Mowbray's hurt.

'Have no fear, though, Geoffrey,' she said, 'I have never yet known the powder to fail. When thou returnest this even to Castle Rising, infuse some more of it in water, soak a cloth embrued with the young knight's blood in the water and apply it to the wound.'

Geoffrey promised to obey these directions, and not

caring to meet his father again after what had passed between them, knowing the old man would be ill at ease in his presence, he determined to pay Friar Nicholas, his old tutor, a visit. He found the learned parson, as usual, engrossed in study, surrounded by his beloved astronomical instruments and recondite tomes.

'Still busy with thy theory regarding the solar system, Father?' inquired Geoffrey.

'Nay, nay, call it not that, my good boy,' replied Nicholas with a smile. 'Thou must call it an hypothesis. Yea, I am busy with it, and now am fully satisfied it is the only correct system of astronomy. Tycho Brahe, with his modification of the Ptolemaic system, is wrong. The earth is not in the centre of the universe as he argueth; nor do the sun and the planets revolve around it. I cannot yet fully explain the laws which govern the movements of the planets, but I hope to before long.'

The young knight had some knowledge of the astronomy of the time, thanks to the instruction of his old tutor, whose chiefest delight was to discuss the subject, and they sat talking over the latter's hypothesis. Suffice it to say that it was almost identical with that promulgated by Copernicus, the celebrated Canon of Thorn, more than a century later, and embraced many of the essential features now accepted.

It was growing dusk and the rain was again falling heavily when he left the hospitable portal to return to the White Hart for his squire and horse, intending to pay his promised visit to Sir Rupert. As he gained the market-place, he was surprised to see some fifty men-at-arms and a like number of mounted archers drinking pots of ale in the saddle outside the door of the inn. The lights from this shone upon the Royal livery.

'What meaneth this?' the young knight asked himself. 'Hath the prince sent for me?'

He hastened forward, and cried out in delighted surprise as a young squire came out of the inn.

'Mortloe! Rex! Well met, old friend!'

'Ah, Sir Geoffrey, I was just going in search of thee. Well met indeed,' cried his old comrade, running forward and shaking his hand vigorously. 'Thou art

bound for Rising, thy father and squire tell me. Thither also am I bound on an errand that brooks of no great delay. Ah, here cometh Dickon with thy horse, well-remembered old "Silver Blaze." Mount and ride with me, and I will tell thee as we go what hath brought me from the Court, my purpose at Rising.'

Wondering and curious, Sir Geoffrey sprang into 'Silver Blaze's' saddle, and Mortloe gave the word to the troop to gallop.

'We must ride fast to make up for the time I have lost in stopping at your father's inn, Sir Geoffrey. I am on a matter of great urgency.'

'Is there some treason afoot?' asked the young knight, anxiously, intuitively connecting his late suspicions of the Lady Alicia Crosbie with his companion's business in that part of the country.

'Thou hast said it, though I see not how thou canst have guessed it. There is a plot to effect the escape of the Dowager Queen from Castle Rising. Sir John de Maltravers is at the bottom of it, and the King of France, I may say, at the top. Her lady-in-waiting, the Lady Alicia Crosbie, has acted as a go-between. A fishing-vessel is to put into the Wash to-night and lie off the shore at Heacham to take them aboard. It is probably already awaiting them, though the hour of the flight is fixed at nine, and we should arrive in time to prevent the Queen leaving the Castle.'

'My suspicions are now convictions, that the mysterious knight was Maltravers, and that it was by his hand poor Sir Rupert got his hurt,' exclaimed Geoffrey. And he proceeded to tell his surprised and horrified companion of what had befallen that morning.

'As sure as surety itself, it was Maltravers who threw the dagger at Sir Rupert,' said Mortloe, at the end of his account. 'Well, with Heaven's grace, the wounded knight will recover, and the guilty ones receive the meed of their misdeeds before four more hours pass. I have my orders to hang Maltravers to the nearest tree on capture.'

They dashed along through the dirty night, their horses splashing the mud high about them.

'I am first to secure the safe custody of the Queen

Mother and the Lady Alicia at the Castle, then ride with my lances and seize the ship at Heacham,' continued Mortloe. 'The King was informed of the plot by one of the spies he hath in high places in France, beside King Philip's own throne indeed. For his Majesty hath his spies at the French Court, the same as Philip has his here in England. The letter of apprisal disclosed Barnaby, the royal jester, thou'lt be surprised to hear, as one helping in the plot. He was arrested, and in fear of his life confessed all; how he hath long been conspiring with the Lady Alicia Crosbie and Maltravers.'

They reached Rising village, and were sweeping past the old church of St. Lawrence, when Mortloe suddenly reined in, the rest of the cavalcade following his example in some confusion, almost riding him and Sir Geoffrey down.

'Nay, I must have been mistaken,' exclaimed he. 'Forward again! Methought I saw two or three dark figures flitting about among the tombstones, Sir Geoffrey. But the night is so dark, my fancy doubtless played me a trick, though perchance they were some of the villagers. Yet must they have a strange taste, an 'twere so, dodging amongst graves on such a night.'

'Belike as not, the shadows of the church deceived thee, Rex,' replied Geoffrey, never remembering the secret passage that led from the old Saxon church inside the earthworks of the Castle to the churchyard, which he had traversed with the Black Prince nearly two years before.

The wardens at the castle gatehouse readily admitted them on their giving their names, and Geoffrey and Mortloe were at once conducted to Sir Henry's presence.

'Queen Isabella is in her sleeping apartment with the Lady Alicia. She complained of a slight indisposition and hath kept her chamber all afternoon,' said the old knight, when Mortloe had stated the object of his visit. 'I will send her page to make sure she is still within it, and to require the presence of her lady-in-waiting; and then I will post a guard outside her door with orders not to suffer her to leave it on any pretext.'

Young Master de Molines, the Queen Mother's page,

was summoned and sent with the message to her room. While he was gone, Geoffrey inquired as to Sir Rupert.

'He is very bad, Sir Geoffrey. The hurt hath grown much angrier, and hath broken afresh. The chirurgeon hath grave fears he will not see another sun rise. His father is with him and remaineth here the night.'

Geoffrey was greatly distressed. He took out the phial containing the Sympathetic Powder, and gave it to Sir Henry, bidding him tell the surgeon to do with it what Dame Joan had advised.

'I ride with Master Mortloe to help capture this vessel at Heacham,' he said. 'I trust on our return to have better tidings of poor Rupert.'

Master de Molines came bursting into the apartment with a look of alarm upon his face. He was followed by Lady Beatrice.

'My mistress is not in her apartment, Sir Henry,' he cried, 'nor yet is the Lady Alicia in hers. The Lady Beatrice here will tell——'

'I lent them my heuk and a mantle of Sybil's,' interrupted Lady Beatrice, excitedly. 'Oh, is there aught wrong, father? The Lady Alicia said they but wanted to pass the warder at the door to pay a vow before our Lady's altar in the Saxon chapel.'

Sir Henry, Geoffrey, and Mortloe, simultaneously gasped:

'She has escaped!'

'By the passage under the chapel,' added the old knight; whereon our hero exclaimed with a snap of the fingers and a frown of disgust:

'Oh, where were my wits? They were those thou didst see in the churchyard, of a verity, Rex. To horse—to horse, if we would overtake them ere it be too late!'

He and Mortloe rushed from the room, followed by Sir Henry. The rest of the cavalcade had not dismounted. Springing into their saddles, Geoffrey and the young squire gave the word again to ride, the governor bawling to the warders to throw wide the gates. Out across the stone bridge over the moat dashed the horsemen and away through the black night and the pelting rain, with loose reins and busy spurs.

XXIII

THE LADY ALICIA'S SECRET

'YONDER they ride! Yonder they ride!'

The pursuers had just passed through Snettisham, and there was a long stretch of fairly level ground before them. The wisp of moon struggling through the rain clouds faintly illuminated it, and revealed to them four mounted figures straining away at as fast a pace as themselves.

'Spur! spur!' shouted Mortloe, dashing his own as he spoke again and again into the flanks of his steaming mount, and shooting forward like an arrow.

Sir Geoffrey Halford followed his example, and the two young leaders stretched away from their men, who straggled behind in all the disorder of the neck-or-nothing chase. But the fugitives' horses were fresher than the pursuers', who had been abroad all day, and maintained, if they did not increase, their advantage. Seeming to spurn the earth, the wild race continued up hill and down dale, without either party gaining on the other. The mud flew high from the flying hoofs; the horses reeked with sweat, and the pelting rain nearly blinded the riders and ran in streams from their capotes.

Faster, faster the pursuers flew, while those they sought to overtake kept ever the same distance ahead, like elusive will-o'-the-wisps. 'Silver Blaze' could not outstrip Mortloe's own mount; for though he had not been ridden so hard and long, he was a war-horse, and not meant for speed so much as ponderous weight in the charge and strength to carry the heavy panoply of himself and his master. Nevertheless, he held his own in the furious gallop with the rouncie the squire bestrode and likewise dropped his fellow-chargers, ridden by the men-at-arms, further and further in the rear. The light-

mounted archers, only, kept anywhere near their leaders, and they were all broken and scattered along the road in twos and threes.

The straggling village of Heacham appeared ahead.

'They will do us after all, me feareth,' panted Mortloe. 'We should have changed horses at Castle Rising, but there was no time. And once they gain the boat that must be waiting for them, we are helpless. Faster, faster, or I am shent in the King's favour. Don't spare your steed, Sir Geoffrey. We two can hold Maltravers and his ruffians at bay until the men come up.'

The four fugitives wheeled towards the shore. Sir Geoffrey and Mortloe turned upon their track.

'Huzza! The tide's out. We may win yet,' cried the squire.

The hollow booming of the surf reached their ears. They gained the firm flat sands, and through the rain and the blackness descried those they were after outlined against the in-rushing, foaming tide ahead. Once more goring their wearied steeds' flanks, they tore on, and caught sight of a small skiff dancing upon the tide in the grip of some half-dozen dusky forms.

The fugitives' horses refused to enter the frothing waters, shied affrightedly aside, and their riders, in attempting to urge them forward, lost time, and enabled Sir Geoffrey and Mortloe to diminish the distance between them. Desisting at length, two of the quartet sprang from their saddles, and whisked the other two from theirs; then, with their burdens in their arms, went plunging, stumbling through the surf, wading now to the knees, now to the ankles, as the wash of the waves ebbed. The men holding the boat, waist deep themselves in the icy waters, with a babel of shouts, came lifting and bumping their half-stranded craft along to meet them.

Sir Geoffrey and Mortloe reached the water's edge; and, as if by mutual arrangement, did not try to head their horses into the spume, but leaped from their saddles and went wading out after on foot. The two fugitives were hampered by their heavy burdens; but, nevertheless, their movements winged by wild haste

and fear, they reached the boat just as the young knight and squire came splashing up, hot on their heels.

'Save the Queen! Take her, some of ye, and into the boat with her! Creyke, to me! We ha' but two of the meddlesome fools to deal with!' bawled the well-remembered tones of Sir John de Maltravers.

He hastily consigned his burden to two of the sailors, and wheeled, sword in hand, upon Sir Geoffrey. Their swords clashed as they met, panting, thigh-deep in the surge; and then Sir John dashed in with hastily-drawn dagger, hoping to get under our hero's guard. But his quick movement was baulked by a rolling wave that nearly swept him off his feet, and ere he could recover himself Geoffrey's sword was sheathed in his breast.

With an awful cry, he disappeared in the heart of a curling comber; and the young victor, without giving a look to his companion, plunged at the boat. Several of the sailors had scrambled in; and in selfish concern for their safety, unmindful of their comrades, were thrusting it off. Geoffrey seized the gunwale; and holding to it ran one of the fellows through the shoulder, and another through the arm, causing them to drop the oars with bellows of pain.

Then into the boat he vaulted; and, lunging right and left with quick-darting steel, drove all its occupants out in a mad stampede into the water again—all save the huddled-up female figure crouching in the stern.

Guessing this was the Dowager Queen, he turned to her, keeping a wary eye about him, however, and said:

'Madam, you must return to Rising with us. 'Tis the King's command.'

'Accursed meddler, take your deserts!' screamed she, and flew at him like the she-wolf she had been called.

A dagger flashed in her grip, and its point went through Geoffrey's supertotus, doublet, and vest, and grazed his skin, drawing the blood, as he seized her arm, and arrested the full force of the blow only in the nick of time. He thrust her back upon the thwart, and wrenched the dagger from her grasp, tossing it into the heaving waters alongside.

The boat rolled gunwale under, and was swamped

in a moment. Catching his unwilling prisoner up in his arms, struggling and writhing desperately, Sir Geoffrey, however, leaped clear as the boat sank under them. He saw Mortloe, bearing the resisting form of Lady Alicia, making towards him, several of the dismounted archers wading out, and the French seamen struggling or swimming away on either hand. A shower of cross-bow bolts whizzed through the darkness about him, and slightly wounded a couple of the archers.

Another boat had approached the shore, unobserved in the hurly-burly, and was now picking up the swimmers.

'Thou hast the Queen, Sir Geoffrey?' anxiously inquired Mortloe.

'Aye, this is she. Forbear, madam; 'tis useless to struggle further.'

'Praise be!' ejaculated the other, fervently. 'The squire fought gamely, and I feared he would keep me engaged until the boat got away with her. I was nigh mad with anxiety. To the shore! To the shore! Pick me off some of those marksmen in yon boat, lads, ere they send another flight amongst us.'

Sir Geoffrey and Mortloe waded ashore, with their unwilling captives screaming hysterically with mortification and rage, while the archers bent their bows, and sent a hail of shafts at the boat. It sheered off with cries of terror and fury, a second ill-ordered shower of bolts from it splashing futilely into the surf.

'Madam, you must pardon my rude handling,' said Geoffrey as he stepped upon dry land, and set the Dowager Queen on her feet; 'but his Majesty's command hath to be obeyed, and, sith you would not return with us of your own free will, I was obliged to use strong measures.'

'A murrain on thee!' hissed Isabella, her black eyes gleaming as with points of fire in the darkness, and her whole form quivering with unspeakable hate and fury. 'I know thee. Thou art that young upstart knight, Halford, who hath thwarted me at every turn sith first thou camest under my son's notice. Wanion take thee!'

And she spat in his face.

'Madam, that was indeed a queenly act,' replied Geoffrey. 'Now suffer me to assist you to your saddle.'

'A malison on ye all! I will go back to Castle Rising on St. Tib's Eve.* I will not return, unless ye drag me there by main force.'

'An you force us, madam, we must e'en do that,' said Mortloe, sternly.

Queen Isabella glared upon the speaker as if she would annihilate him with her eyes; then, turning to the weeping and now utterly broken-down Lady Alicia, she said, in harsh, biting tones:

'Needs must when the devil drives. Come, Alicia, girl, dry thy tears; they annoy me. Let these most chivalrous gentlemen who war on helpless women not be able to boast they took us back tearful and distraught, maugré we return by weeping cross.'†

'Sir John—Sir John! I shall never see him more. He is dead — dead,' moaned the Lady Alicia. 'Oh, my beloved madam, forgive me, but I cannot contain my grief. Thou knowest we were to have married when we were safe on French soil.'

'And it is for him thou lamentest—not my frustrated hope? Then thou mayest cry thine eyes out for all Isabella careth. The fool deserved his fate for not being able to overcome a springald like yon, at his years. Sirs, I am at your service. I opine ye wish not to take me back to Rising soaked to the skin, for all your discourteous conduct.'

Mortloe held her palfrey's stirrup; and, taking the little foot she placed in his hand, assisted her into the saddle. The Lady Alicia, who had checked her grief at the unfeeling words of her royal mistress, mechanically mounted also with Sir Geoffrey's assistance. The young knight and squire sprang to horse, the latter calling off his men; and the troop, forming around their fair prisoners, rode from the shore at a far more leisurely pace than they had come to it.

The long miles back to Rising were traversed in gloomy silence for the most part; for the troopers were saddle-weary, cold, and wet through, and the horses almost dead beat. One or two of the steeds indeed

* There was no Saint Tib in the calendar, and so the expression meant 'never,' like that of the Greek 'kalends.'

† Worsted in an undertaking.

limped painfully, having cast shoes in the wild chase and become lame. The rain still fell pitilessly; and it was with deep sighs of satisfaction the party at last came once more in sight of the Castle earthworks. They found the whole place one blaze of light, and all within anxiously looking out for them.

Sir Henry Penthony, in slouched hat and long cloak, came hurrying to meet them, attended by four link-bearers, whose burdens hissed and spluttered in the pelting rain.

'You have got her?' he called out, eagerly.

'Yea, my lord, but we had to ride the whole way to Heacham, and took her not then without a stiff fight for it, knee-deep in the surf, where that most false villain and black-hearted desperado, Maltravers, fell by Sir Geoffrey's good sword,' returned Mortloe.

'Aye, Sir Henry, I must again be beholden to thy undesirable hospitality, for the which, natheless, in present circumstances I shall not be altogether ungrateful, seeing that I am dog-weary and nigh perished with cold and wet,' cried out Queen Isabella. 'Conduct me forthwith, prithee, to where thou hast a good fire, and let me have some mulled sack to thaw further my frozen body.'

Sir Henry made no reply, but led the way inside the gates to the portal of the keep. There he courteously offered his hand to his runaway charge, and assisted her to dismount. Sir Geoffrey and Mortloe, leaving their followers to look after their four-footed companions, followed the pair up the perron with the Lady Alicia, supporting her half-fainting form between them. At the head of the stairs Sir Eustace de Mowbray, Lady Penthony, and Sybil and Beatrice were awaiting them.

All turned into the dining-hall without a word. The great open fireplace was filled with huge logs, which were crackling merrily and diffusing a genial heat around. Queen Isabella, with a proudly contemptuous and defiant look and air, hurried up to the blaze and stood before it, spreading out her lily-white, dimpled hands to catch the warm rays. Lady Alicia pulled up, however, on the threshold, and, turning upon Mortloe, demanded huskily:

'What are thy orders from the King as regards me—tell me? Keep me not in suspense.'

'They are to take thee back with me to Windsor, madam.'

'And my punishment. What is't to be?'

'That I know not, madam.'

'I will not undergo it. Thus do I rob the angry monarch of his revenge.'

Before either the young squire or Sir Geoffrey could prevent her she had snatched a dagger from under her robe and plunged it into her bosom to the hilt. With a deep groan she sank in the horrified young knight's arms, her eyes closing tightly in pain.

Cries of horror and consternation were uttered by all, and in an instant Sir Henry and Sir Eustace were bending anxiously over her. She opened her eyes with another groan, and, writhing half round, strove to thrust Sir Geoffrey from her.

'Not thy arms! No, I cannot die easy in them. Geoffrey Halford, I have wronged thee deeply. I may as well confess the secret I have so long nursed in my bosom, seeing that I am bound for the land of shadows—that no earthly power can save me. Sir Eustace de Mowbray, I once loved thee, but thou didst reject me for the Lady Mabel Wentworth, whom thou didst marry. I revenged myself on thee and her by kidnapping your younger son, Eustace. This is he!' And she pointed to Sir Geoffrey. 'He is your second boy. Seek out Barnaby, the King's jester. 'Twas he stole the lad for me, and Roger Halford also will vouch for what I say. He agreed for a liberal sum to bring the boy up as his. Sir John—Sir John, my beloved, I come to thee.'

Dreadful spasms shook her form, then with one wild, half-choked scream she sank back dead in Sir Geoffrey's supporting arms.

'Poor fool!' exclaimed Queen Isabella. 'She is shent now, body and soul. This is the crowning horror of the night. I can bear no more. Let me to my chamber.'

And flinging her arms wildly before her she rushed from the hall.

'This is no place for ye, my sweetings,' cried Sir

Henry, turning to his wife and daughters. 'Withdraw, I pray you, while this unhappy woman's body is removed to await what last rites the Church will permit in her case.'

Sir Eustace held out his arms to Geoffrey, who rushed into them.

'My boy—my long-lost boy! I need no further proofs than this wretched lady's assertion and my own convictions that thou art my stolen son.'

'And I, too, need no better proofs, my lord—my father.'

'O Eustace—Geoffrey, which shall I call thee? My heart would be indeed happy at this moment, an it were not sick with apprehension for thy brother's safety. He is fast sinking. The surgeon says he will not see the sun rise. Come, let us to him. He hath told me all, and ye must be indeed brothers ere it be too late.'

The father and son sought the apartment where Sir Rupert lay.

It was clear his life was ebbing fast. He lay quite still with his eyes closed; but he opened them on their entry. Geoffrey was shocked to see how ghastly he looked.

'Rupert,' said his father, 'I have brought Geoffrey to thee as thou didst ask, but—dost hear me?—thou seest in him a real brother, thy brother Eustace, so long thought dead. The Lady Alicia hath just confessed he is my younger son, whom she had kidnapped to revenge a supposed slight eighteen years ago. Look up, dear Rupert, and greet thy brother in fact as well as in name.'

'Is't so indeed? Thou wert right then, father, when thou saidst thou didst see our sainted mother in him over in Calais, ye'll recall. Geoffrey—I prefer to call thee by the name I know thee best by—Geoffrey, thou wilt forgive me for what passed between us this undern?'*

'It is already forgotten and forgiven, dear brother mine,' huskily replied Geoffrey, tears rolling down his cheeks as he bent and kissed Rupert.

'Thank thee, Geoff, old boy! Kiss me again. I am not long for this world. I know it—I feel it. Father, thou wilt not be left without a son and heir, then; I praise our dear Lord for it. 'Tis a comfort for me to think thou

* Forenoon.

wilt not be left utterly alone in thine old age, with my going. Geoffrey—call him Geoffrey, not Eustace, dad, for our short-lived friendship's sake—Geoffrey will take my place and be thy stay and hope.'

The lord of Hunstanton and his new-found younger son could not restrain their tears, which fell copiously.

'Nay, nay, weep not, dad—brother, I am going to a better world, my sins forgiven me. And Geoff, thou and I could not both have Sybil Penthony,' with a wan attempt at a smile. 'Bring her here, Geoffrey! I know thou dost love her as she loveth thee. Let me join your hands together and see you pledged to each other before I go. 'Tis a dying man's wish.'

'I will bring her, dear brother,' said Geoffrey. And he left the room, hardly able to contain his emotion.

He soon returned, leading Sybil by the hand. The fair girl was consumed with grief.

'Nay, nay, do not weep for me, sweeting,' said Rupert. 'Let me see thy beloved face smile upon me for the last time on earth. I may not have thee, as I had hoped, for my wife, but I know thou wilt be happy with my brother. Come, kneel beside me, and let me join your hands even as the priest will do later before God's altar.'

They knelt beside the bed, and he clasped their hands together, saying:

'May ye be happy in each other's love all time, and forget not your fond brother when he is gone.'

Sybil could not speak with her sobs; but when he died, as peacefully as a child falling asleep to all seeming, some hours later, it was with her kiss on his smiling lips, his brother's and father's hands clasped tight in one of his, and a cross—the emblem of man's redemption and resurrection—in the other.

. . . . . .

The terrible scourge, called the Black Death, or Black Plague, did come to England, and its dire ravages did more than anything else to prolong the truce with France. For two years, history tells us, the pestilence raged in these islands, and swept away a third of the population, the same as it had done in every other land. But the awful disease passed the chief characters of our story by,

though both Barnaby the Jester and Cyril Branscombe fell victims to it.

The manor of Dersingham was finished, but it was never occupied by Sir Geoffrey, who took up his residence with his father at Hunstanton Castle. Thither, a year after the plighting of their troth by Rupert's death-bed, he brought Sybil to rule it as his wife. Sir Eustace lived to a ripe old age, and his son followed the Black Prince again to France, and led the Hunstanton men at Poictiers. Ere then, Reginald Mortloe had exchanged his silver spurs for the golden ones of a knight, and had sought and obtained the hand of the Lady Beatrice Penthony. He was possessed of plenty of this world's goods, and he purchased Dersingham Manor from his old comrade-in-arms, and settled on that estate with his bride, so that she might be near both her father and sister.

As for Roger Halford, Geoffrey and Sir Eustace forgave him his deception and crime; and he sold the goodwill of the White Hart, and retired to end his days quietly in Snettisham on a handsome pension from those he had wronged. Dame Joan continued as his housekeeper, and Sir Geoffrey and Sybil often rode over to see her.

Stout Dickon Watkinson remained Geoffrey's squire until death parted them, refusing the offer of knighthood for his valorous doings at Poictiers. And when a little Rupert and little Mabel appeared at Hunstanton Castle, old Dickon loved to dandle them, and taught the brave boy, almost as soon as the youngster could toddle, to bend a miniature long-bow, the proud weapon of his country.

As for the 'Dark Lady of Rising,' the murderess-queen, it appears uncertain whether she died at that fortress in the twenty-eighth year of her imprisonment, and the sixty-third year of her age, two years after Poictiers, or was permitted to withdraw to Guienne, the great territory of France, which she had brought as her portion to her husband and ruled for a time with her favourite, Roger Mortimer, there to end her days under the surveillance of the Black Prince at Bordeaux.

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